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Video game cultivation: Sowing the seeds of consumer behavior

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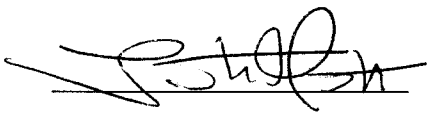

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Video Game Cultivation: Sowing the Seeds of Consumer Behavior

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Jonathan K. Mattson

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Abstract

George Gerbner (1998) dedicated a significant amount of this life attempting to understand the creation and impact of mass media messages on viewers. Out of this research sprang cultivation theory, which holds viewers' realities can be impacted over time by the media environment they inhabit and its overarching messages. While often applied to television, cultivation theory has largely ignored other mediums, specifically video games. Video games have evolved as a medium since the public arcades of the 1980's and now run on high-powered, internet-enabled consoles. These consoles allow producers into the home of the consumer, saturating them with messages. This thesis advocates video game producer messages are encoded in such a manner as to encourage the consumption of video game content and instill in the consumer a reality constructed by the producer. To interrogate these messages, I conduct a case study of a video game developer, "Tacit Games" (a pseudonym), and examine how the producer attempts to cultivate consumption in the consumer through approaches like downloadable content and framing the video game experience for the video game consumer. Specifically, I examine messages surrounding the developer's franchise, *City Mayhem* (also a pseudonym). To do this, I conduct qualitative interviews with five senior employees of the company to ascertain what messages are produced for the consumer in relation to the goals of this thesis. The data collected from these interviews is analyzed through the lens of cultural Marxism, which entails the examination of the limitations and pressures exerted on the formation of culture.

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I would like to acknowledge my thesis chair, Dr. Scott Walus, as well as the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. David Gracon and Dr. Richard G. Jones, Jr. for their academic feedback and support throughout this creative process. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Walus for his organizational skills in the approach to this project – and the Rumba.

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To those at "Tacit Games," thank you for your honest input on the production process of the development of the "*City Mayhem*" franchise and for discussing your relationship with the many dedicated fans of your products.

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Chapter 1: Situating the Culture Phenomenon

Video games are a popular pastime across the globe. Reuters (2011) estimates the world-wide net revenue for the video game industry in 2011 at $66 billion dollars. Many people play video games for a variety of reasons – the impressive visual effects, engaging stories, interactivity, and of course, the fun! However, looking past the industry façade reveals economic structures found in other mediums (such as television and film). The video game industry operates similar to other entertainment industries in the search for profit. Companies compete for profit and strive to create products that sell, looking for repeatable molds. They also attempt to control the way in which consumers consume through the encoding of messages for consumers. The interactions between the producer and consumer, as well as the messages created by the producer for the consumer represent an interesting window into the negotiation of culture and reality. It is for this reason I center my study around the messages encoded by producers for consumers and examine these messages through George Gerbner's cultivation theory through the lens of cultural Marxism. I argue video game developers encode messages for consumers with the express intent of cultivating consumer behavior and influencing their perception of reality with the goal of increased profits. This is problematic because it creates a space where consumers may be exploited or manipulated. These messages are subject to the same pressures and limitations imposed upon the producer by the very structure in which it operates. I also seek to identify these limitations and pressures in this thesis whenever possible. I am hopeful this text will add to the discussion on video games, cultivation theory, and cultural Marxism, while providing additional grounds for consumer awareness and praxis.

I examine one U.S.-based video game developer, given the pseudonym "Tacit Games," and interview five senior employees (a producer, two associate producers, a senior programmer, and a studio design manager) with the intent of answering three research questions:

RQ 1: What messages are encoded by Tacit Games to cultivate consumers and what pressures and limitations influence these messages?

RQ 2: In what ways does Tacit Games attempt to cultivate consumer behavior?

RQ 3: How does Tacit Games attempt to frame messages surrounding its products?

Many of the messages encoded by Tacit Games are based around specific, AAA video games. These games are given pseudonyms throughout this study in an effort to maintain anonymity. A detailed overview of Tacit Games' products and the rationale for this anonymity is provided in later chapters. The current chapter of this thesis seeks to legitimize the field of video games as a scholarly field, examine the development of the video game industry, and provide a ground for the application of cultivation theory. To begin, I provide a brief description of the history of video games. This is necessary to provide context for the rest of this thesis and to ground those with little experience with the topic.

A Brief History of Video Games

Video games have a long history, dating back decades to the 1960s. For clarification purposes, it is important to define the boundaries of the term "video game." As the name implies, "video game" refers to the medium in which the game is played – the video screen. Ralph Baer is seen by industry historians (Wolf, 2008; Dillon, 2011) as the father

of video games, being the first to create games that used the television as a display device. The first commercially successful video game appeared in 1972, when *Pong* hit pinball arcades, ushering in the era of the video arcade (Wolf, 2008). The success of other games like *Space Invaders*, *Pac-Man*, and *Centipede* seemed to bolster the staying power of the invention. By 1981, there were an estimated 24,000 arcades, 400,000 street locations, and a whopping 1.5 million arcade video games world-wide (Wolf, 2008). Sick with "Pac-Man Fever," children and adults alike spent countless quarters enjoying this form of entertainment. Under the arcade model of consumption, players spent quarters for a set amount of time in the game, a specific number of "lives," or a set number of rounds. In an effort to cement the video game culture even further, competitions were created by both game developers and arcade owners, where stick-twiddlers played for more than just the top spot on the leaderboard, playing for prizes. Cooperative and player-versus-player games added another dimension to the culture. Instead of heading out to the movies to watch the latest film or staying at home to watch television, many people chose to instead visit the arcade for the flashing lights, fun sounds, and the company of others in a unique atmosphere. From the simple, abstract version of tennis featured in *Pong,* a seemingly-robust culture had grown. However, doubts were cast on the future of the leisure activity when the video arcade bubble burst in 1983, turning once-bustling video arcades into novelties that drew in far fewer customers (Wolf, 2008). This directly led to the creation of the home console.

The rise of the console.

Following the collapse of video arcades, the video game industry shifted its focus in a new direction, the home console. While video games do exist on other devices, such

as personal computers and smartphones, etc., this thesis examines video games solely from a console standpoint. Video game consoles are essentially personal computers dedicated to a singular purpose – video gaming.

Struggling to find new markets, Nintendo created the Nintendo Entertainment System or NES in 1985, which became extremely popular and breathed new life into the faltering industry (Wolf, 2008). This invention also altered the direction of video gaming forever. Unlike the dedicated arcade consoles, the NES featured a cartridge system, which had been popularized by other previous consoles like the Atari 2600. Each cartridge was a self-contained game which consumers plugged into the console, effectively turning one video game machine into many. This was an important development, since arcade games often existed only as expensive, bulky machines. Consumers could now have their own personal video arcade, at home. These changes inevitably lead to a different kind of commodification. Instead of doling out quarters for limited amounts of time at an arcade, players were spending sizeable amounts of money on video game cartridges to enjoy at home to keep the experience fresh. Additionally, players no longer had to leave the comfort of their living room. Over 1,000 NES titles were released during the life of the console, with 64 titles (such as *Tetris, The Legend of Zelda,* and *Metroid)* selling more than one million copies each (Wolf, 2008). This foreshadowed the future of the video game industry, where consumption did not end with the purchase of the video game system. Instead, it offered a gateway to even more consumption and commodification. This came in the form of excessories (accessories) and changed the economic model of the console video game. These changes had

implications for the consumer and his or her pocketbook, which are discussed throughout this thesis.

Nintendo in particular helped to shape video game consumption through excessories. As part of efforts to boost sales after the video arcade crash, the Zapper light gun and Robotic Operating Buddy (ROB) were created for the NES (Wolf, 2008). These inventions were framed by the producers of video games as making the video game experience more interesting, realistic, and complete. The Zapper functioned like a virtual reality pistol, allowing the user to "shoot" things that appeared on the screen and was made popular by the game *Duck Hunt*. ROB was a small robot that could be used to play stacking games. This represents the first example of commodifying outside the console, a trend Nintendo and other video game companies would continue and expand until this day. Marketing messages from the video game industry were encoded to make the consumer feel like without these excessories, the player was missing out on the best experience. While such excessories were not required to enjoy the console, there was an exclusivity associated with the devices. The effort to market such excessories can be seen as an exploitation or manipulation of the consumer. As home video game systems like the NES became more popular, many video games featured cooperative and competitive play to help bring the arcade experience into the living room.

Cartridge technology advanced steadily for the next decade, improving the video game experience for customers until the widespread use of the compact disc (CD) format. This continued improvement to video game technology went hand in hand with the idea that with the latest and most exclusive items comes social prestige and status. The CD-based Sony Playstation launched in the U.S. in 1995, ushering in the next new era in

video game technology (Wolf, 2008). This technological approach allowed more data storage for improved graphics, sound, and features. The system enjoyed enormous success. Aside from advancements in game technology, excessories abounded. To save your progress in a game, the Playstation required a memory card which could be purchased by the consumer. An attachable screen was also created for the Playstation, effectively transforming the console into a self-contained media center. By the end of its production life in 2006, over 100 million Playstations had been produced, and it was home to nearly 8,000 different titles, with over 960 million games sold (Wolf, 2008). However, the console industry's success also resulted in some unforeseen challenges that shaped the industry's direction. One of these issues was piracy.

The Playstation was the first console to suffer from a major piracy problem. Modifcation chips could be soldered into the console to modify and neutralize disc authenticity measures, meaning pirated copies could be played easily (Wolf, 2008). It may have been due to this illegal activity that the video game industry began a shift to marketing excessories, since such items are more difficult to copy. With its next console designed to compete with the Playstation, Nintendo flooded the field with excessories, like the Expansion Pak and Rumble Pak.

The Nintendo 64 (N64), which launched in the U.S. during 1996, employed the older cartridge technology, and stands apart from the Playstation – not in terms of technical specifications (which are similar) – but rather the marketing of excessories. The N64 allowed for four players to play on a single console, compared to the Playstation's maximum of two. This meant a larger market for controllers. In addition, the N64 offered many excessories to enhance the console and give the consumer the full experience that

could be attained by the console. Similar to the Playstation, consumers could purchase a memory card to save their game data. The Expansion Pak doubled the console's RAM memory, allowing for better graphics for specific games (Wolf, 2008). The Rumble Pak was another excessory that caused the controller to vibrate in the hands of the player during an action scene, creating a new dimension of the video game experience. A voice recognition system excessory was even created, which enabled users to "speak" to characters in games. In addition to these "first-party" excessories, other corporations sprang up to develop "third-party" alternatives like steering wheels for racing games and cheat-enabling devices, such as the Game Genie and GameShark. While not required to play most games, these excessories were framed by the industry as an improvement to the experience for the consumer. If the consumer did not purchase an excessory, they ran the risk of not actualizing his or her video game experience. Approximately 33 million N64 consoles were sold when production ceased in 2002 (Wolf, 2008). The trend of excessories and commodification outside the console would continue into the next generation and diversify with the integration of the Internet. Is this intersection that frames the focus of this study.

Early consoles and the Internet.

In 2000, Microsoft launched its original XBOX game console and Sony its Playstation 2. These consoles arguably shook the foundations of the video game industry by incorporating the Internet. Both used the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) format for video games, which was vastly superior to CD, but still limited in terms of data capacity (many games exceeded the amount of space on one disc). By this time, online multiplayer was commonplace on the personal computer. While the Sega Dreamcast was the first to

console to include a built-in internet modem, the XBOX and Playstation 2 were the first to truly make online console multiplayer gaming popular. In addition to cooperative and competitive play offered by internet-ready consoles, such systems also allowed for users to download digital content for a price. Suddenly, an entirely new avenue of excessory was created.

Downloadable content as excessory.

This downloadable content (DLC) allowed for even further commodification of video games outside the console by offering content through digital distribution outside of the typical game package. Downloadable content constitutes an expansion of the video game through a digital process, similar to an expansion. However, downloadable content is primarily delivered digitally, as opposed to a disc or cartridge. Downloadable content can take the form of any addition to the game, such as a new map pack in a multiplayer game, or a new appearance item for the player's character. The creation of downloadable content would have long-standing implications for the industry that continue to this day. In addition to purchasing the physical game, players could now expand their gaming experience without leaving the couch. Downloadable content is a unique example of an excessory, since consumers are purchasing something devoid of a physical form. Players cannot hold a tangible disc or cartridge in their hands when it comes to downloadable content. When it comes to downloadable content, consumers essentially pay for a specifically-organized set of binary code which is downloaded via the Internet to a storage device they have already purchased. Unlike other excessories, this practice was slow to take off, partially due to its new nature and the lack of dependable, speedy internet services in the more rural areas. Many people initially refused to purchase the

content, questioning why the content was not included with the physical copy of the game. This represents a gap between the understanding of downloadable content between the consumer and the companies in the industry. Additionally, consoles like the XBOX and Playstation 2 lacked enough storage space to make downloadable content a primary form of distribution. The XBOX contained eight gigabytes of built-in storage, while the Playstation 2 featured an optional 40 gigabyte hard drive). To clarify, a typical video game from this generation of console could range anywhere from one to four gigabytes, hampering the idea. The XBOX also allowed users to save DVDs or music to the hard drive, which further reduced space available for downloading games. An estimated 120 million Playstation 2 consoles were sold by the time the next generation systems were released (Wolf, 2008). Microsoft's XBOX sold a smaller number – 24 million – but it was still impressive for the company's first foray into the console market (Wolf, 2008). The next generation of consoles represents the growing importance of downloadable content and a shift in the direction of excessories.

Current generation consoles.

In 2005, Microsoft released its next console, the XBOX 360. This system represents the modern era of video game consoles. The system is significantly more powerful than its predecessor and includes a 20 gigabyte hard drive right out of the box – a testament to the direction of the industry's business plan and future emphasis on downloadable content as excessory. Realizing not every consumer would be ready for such a system, a tooled-down version called the XBOX 360 Arcade is also available, which does not include the hard drive. This system also lacks cables for high-definition graphics, but the consumer can buy a hard drive or high-definition cables at any time to

utilize the "full power" of the XBOX 360. By this time, Microsoft's XBOX Live online subscription service (required to play games online) was three years old and had succeeded in drawing in millions of subscribers, despite having a fee. Currently, an estimated 40 million people maintain XBOX Live accounts, with a yearly fee of about $50 (IGN, 2012).

XBOX Live has itself expanded to offer non-video game services to customers and has agreements with movie streaming giant Netflix and music streaming service Last.fm to support or provide such services to the consumer. Interestingly, the online service has its own currency – Microsoft Points (MSP). Users can redeem points for things like movie rentals or purchases, music, or video game content through the XBOX 360. While this activity is not at the core focus of the XBOX 360 experience, its existence opens a new direction for consumption through the potential of cross-marketing and synergy. Of course, dozens of excessories exist for the XBOX 360, including the Kinect movement sensor, wireless network adapters, remotes, mini keyboards for instant messaging, driving wheels for racing, joysticks for flight simulators, cameras, headphones, and even customizable faceplates for the console. All of these excessories, including downloadable content, are marketed as a way to better experience the video games offered on the console – analogous to the Zapper or ROB from the days of the NES. Despite a rocky launch (many early consoles were extremely sensitive to heat and would become non-functional), the XBOX 360 system has sold around 70 million units worldwide as of October 2012 (Microsoft, 2012). Microsoft's main competitor, Sony, also released a console in the current generation.

Sony's answer to the XBOX 360 came in 2006, when it launched the Playstation 3 (PS3) console. The PS3 is touted as more powerful than the XBOX 360 and was initially sold in two models, a 20 gigabyte and 60 gigabyte digital storage model. It also includes a Blu-Ray disc drive, enabling it to play high definition Blu-Ray movies and utilize the storage system for video games (Blu-Ray discs contain significantly more storage capacity than DVDs, enabling more data storage on a single disc). Recognizing the lucrative market of digital distribution, Sony launched its own Playstation Network (PSN) with the PS3, in response to Microsoft's XBOX Live. PSN is similar to its competitor (allowing users to purchase downloadable content and play online with friends), but lacked some of its features. Unlike XBOX Live however, PSN players can play games online without paying a fee. Eventually, Sony launched Playstation Plus – a paid, premium service that includes more entertainment perks, discounts, online data storage (cloud computing) and things like early access to demos. Sony also offers many of the same excessories as Microsoft for the PS3. The third competitor in the current console generation comes from one the company credited with blazing the home console path, Nintendo.

The last major gaming console mentioned here and released in the current generation is the Nintendo Wii, which was released days after the PS3 (Wolf, 2008). The system is uniquely based around motion controls and turns the living room into a place of open play. Players' actions are mirrored on the screen through motion sensors inside the controller. This new and more physical approach to gaming resulted not only in new games, but new excessories. Nintendo created the Wii Balance Board, which is required to play certain games. Third party companies created many interesting excessories,

ranging from tennis rackets that attach to the controller for a more realistic appearance and yoga mats. The Wii is also Internet-enabled and has its own free service for online play and the purchase of downloadable content or other services. The console is the most successful of this generation, with nearly 100 million units sold (Nintendo, 2012). The next generation of consoles looks to build on the success of the current generation, but who defines success?

The "evolution" of video game consoles.

With the next generation of consoles on the horizon, it is extremely important to reflect on the changes in video games from the early days. The video game industry frames these changes as an evolution, implying improvements to the experience. Certainly this has occurred in terms of sales numbers. Over its production life of around 14 years, the grandfather of video game consoles, the Atari 2600, sold 30 million units (Wolf, 2008). By comparison, the XBOX 360 sold more than twice as many consoles in about a third of the time (Microsoft, 2012). Clearly video games have grown in popularity over the years, but consoles of the current generation have done more than just outsell their predecessors. The industry also touts improvements to graphics and playability, yet attempts to ignore how producers of video games have progressed in manipulating the consumption tendencies of consumers. Certainly the first Atari owner would likely have raised a skeptical eyebrow if shown the video game systems and excessories of today during the time of the 2600 (or would have been completely overwhelmed by the progress). We are cultivated to consume in specific ways when it comes to video games and this changes over time. I likely have a different experience of video games than a player in the 1980s. It is my own experience with the economic

structure of the video game industry I now provide to provide additional context to the discussion by adding personal narrative.

My Experience and Cultivation with Video Games

It was 1993. As a seven year-old I spent significant portions of my time playing video games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Super Mario Brothers* with friends on their Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) or popping ducks in *Duck Hunt* on the older NES. My parents viewed video games suspiciously and disliked what they called "violent" and "gory" graphics. So, I of course secretly rebelled against their wishes behind the doors of my neighbor's home. Video games were a source of entertainment as well as a social activity for me. Many of my first friendships were born through interactions involving video games and some of these relationships have continued to this day. Not personally owning a video game system also had other, more material, benefits – I never had to pay to play any games. This unique position also allowed me to notice how often my neighbors purchased a new video game. Over the years they accrued dozens of cartridges, ranging from *Mega Man* to *Harvest Moon*. New consoles began appearing as well. The Nintendo 64, Playstation, and Sega Genesis all found a spot in their living room. Then came the excessories. The NES had the Zapper light gun, the SNES had the Super Scope gun, the N64 featured the Rumble Pak, and the Playstation offered a dance pad for the hit arcade game crossover *Dance Dance Revolution* (players stepped on a variety of arrow icons on the mat in an attempt to match those which appeared on the screen). Only receiving an allowance of about $3 a week, it boggled my mind how much money had been spent by my neighbors on video games and excessories. Never having my own system also made me feel left out of the fun. These feelings were

exacerbated by the release of internet-ready consoles like the Sega Dreamcast and XBOX. My friends were now able to play online with people hundreds of miles away. Player 2 no longer had the opportunity to press "start" on the controller – he or she was replaced by someone in another state. Eventually, my parents decided I was responsible and old enough for a video game console around the tender age of 20 and gave me an XBOX 360 for Christmas. Suddenly an entirely new world opened to me. There were so many games to play, so many excessories to buy, and so much money to spend. No longer was I stuck waiting until my friends had time for me to play a video game – I was able to play how I wanted, when I wanted. But what did I really want? The video game industry had the answer, and had been cultivating me for years through the marketing of games and excessories. I had been immersed in the environment of messages encoded by producers.

The XBOX 360's overheating problems were the bane of the owner's experience. The console would overheat without warning and would blink a red ring on the power switch (dubbed scathingly as the "red ring of death," or RROD). The owner would then have to send in the console for repairs. Many gamers found themselves with the RROD just after Microsoft's one year warranty expired for the console. This meant a $100 fee to service the XBOX 360 outside of its warranty period. Eventually, Microsoft acknowledged the frequency of the RROD and design flaws within the console. The company effectively extended the warranty time for RROD problems on original model consoles to three years past the console purchase date. Electronic warranty provider Square Trade estimated one in six XBOX 360 consoles failed within six to ten months. Third party companies capitalized on this fear of the RROD and manufactured cooling

fans that could be attached to the back of the unit to help boost airflow. With the original XBOX 360 costing around $400 at launch, I wanted to protect the investment, so I purchased the fan system for about $20. After spending some time playing games like *Call of Duty 2* and *Battlefield: Bad Company* online (I paid the XBOX Live subscription fee), it became clear to me that just playing online was not the "full experience" offered by the XBOX 360. I wanted the best entertainment experience. A special microphone and headset were required to converse with people over XBOX Live, which Microsoft readily had available at around $15. Users could also video chat with the purchase of an XBOX 360 camera (which now has *Skype* functionality) for a cost of $40. A texting pad that connected to the controller was also available for $15. Growing tired of buying batteries for my controller, I purchased a rechargeable battery and cord for $25. I now found myself in the position of my childhood friends – being the person with the latest game or excessory. I enjoyed playing with online "friends" (people I had met online, but never in person), but always preferred spending time with people I knew face to face. This meant purchasing additional $60 controllers so that a friend and I could play together on split-screen, which effectively turns one television screen into two. Due to saving DVDs and games to my 20 gigabyte XBOX 360 hard drive, I quickly found myself running out of data space. I opted to purchase one of the largest available (250 gigabytes), which retailed for about $200. Even through all of these excessory purchases, I had only scratched the surface of those available. In 2010, Microsoft introduced the Kinect peripheral. The highly-advanced camera is able to track human body movement and translate it into game commands, as well as understand voice commands. At $150, it seemed like a steep price to pay for appeared to some as a glorified webcam. Apparently 18 million people

disagreed with that idea and have purchased the device since its launch (Takahashi, 2012). Kinect is required to play certain games on the XBOX 360, such as *Dance Central*, *Just Dance,* and *Zumba Fitness.* For other games, the device is not required, but the games are marketed as "better with Kinect." Such games typically include interactive sections for the Kinect, like limited voice commands or body motions to accomplish a task with the idea being to make video games more immersive. I could not justify spending the money on the device and as such do not currently own one. Having played with Kinect however, I will admit there is definitely a cool factor and a sense of exclusivity associated with the product. Microsoft's "better with Kinect" tells consumers the best experience requires the latest add-on. Without it, the player's experience is incomplete.

Searching for the full experience.

Discussions in this thesis focus primarily around the XBOX 360, with which I am the most familiar. Baudrillard (1998) spoke of consumption's unlimited character and attaining status through objects. To be the best, you must own the best and the most. Video games are no exception to this idea, and the act of playing video games itself implies the spare recreational time and money to spend on the hobby. In addition, producers of video games provide consumers with the objects that promise to create happiness, but only result in the eternal pursuit of "full experience" through consumption.

So what does it take to have the full experience offered by the XBOX 360? This pursuit quickly becomes quite costly. The original system retailed for $400, add an additional three controllers for $180, a cooling fan for $20, a rechargeable battery and cable for $25, a microphone headset for $15, a text pad for $15, vision camera for $40, a

large hard drive for $200, the Kinect add on for $150, and the annual XBOX Live subscription for $50. This totals to nearly $1,100, and does not include prices of the dozens of other excessories available. Additionally, the actual video games themselves (retailing at $60 a title) are also being expanded through downloadable content to become more profitable for producers.

The actual software games or the high definition television on which to play video games are further costs. This consumption is extended further through downloadable content. The price of downloadable content has also increased over the life span of the console. Specifically with the XBOX 360, early downloadable content was valued around 60 to 200 MSP ($0.75-$2.50). Most downloadable content now retails for between 800 and 1,800 MSP ($10-$22.50). It should be noted the downloadable content of today is generally more robust than the digital content of the past, but how an intangible item is priced and what entity controls this action should be interrogated. Moreover, how have consumers been cultivated to consume in this manner? Without playing the downloadable content, the player fails to attain the full experience. Several video game developers have offered a glimpse of negotiating the full experience through products.

Downloadable content and the full experience.

When it comes to selling downloadable content, few companies match that of Activision, Inc.'s first person shooter *Call of Duty.* The series began in 2003, with the ninth installment of the game released in time for Christmas 2012. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* retails for $60. The disc itself includes single player, multiplayer, and cooperative modes. While the game is marketed as a complete product, Activision has published several downloadable content packs as part of what it calls a "season of

content." Each pack retails for $15, or the equivalent 1,200 MSP. These packs contain game elements like new cooperative missions and multiplayer maps not available in the stock game. A total of four DLC packs are available for the game, bringing the total cost for the complete *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* experience to $120. Players do have the option to purchase a *Call of Duty: Elite* membership for $50, which includes all of the downloadable content at a savings of $10. This type of "season pass" is no longer uncommon in the industry, and Activision has already announced a new season of content will be available for the next *Call of Duty* game scheduled to be released in November 2012, called *Black Ops II.* These passes last for the duration of the game's life cycle until the next game in the series is released. Consumption is continuous. *Call of Duty: Elite* also functions as a kind of social network for players of the game. It includes tools to track a player's skill, offers a new way for players to connect, and even contains structure for truly competitive play. Through *Elite*, players are able to compete in contests for real-world prizes. For example, players may compete for the most "kills" in a set span of time, with the winner receiving articles of clothing or other items.

Players also receive digital badges for competing to showcase their skill. Unfortunately, cheating in the contests is a common problem and detracts from the experience for honest players. Aside from friendly "lone wolf" competition, like-minded players also band together for social enjoyment that often extends outside of the console world to online forums or real-life meetings. The *Call of Duty: Elite* experience is analogous to the vibrant arcade scene of the 1970s and 80s, with a change of location from the streets to the living room. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* also encourages players to show off their fan capital through downloadable themes for the XBOX 360

home screen (dashboard) and outfits for *XBOX Live* avatars (customizable digital representations of the player). These digital items run anywhere between 80 to 240 MSP ($1-$3) and are not unique to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. Many other games offer similar items and *XBOX Live* includes a store specifically for purchasing avatar items. As evidenced by these examples, the price for what could be termed the "full experience" in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* game easily more than doubles its already lofty $60 price tag. Other games have followed this similar model of consumption.

Another game has stretched the definitions of the full experience even further. Electronic Arts' *Battlefield 3* is comparable in many ways to Activision's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, and the two directly compete with one another. Both are first person shooters and both include a single player, multiplayer, and cooperative game mode. *Battlefield 3* also includes a subscription service for downloadable content similar to *Elite*. *Battlefield Premium* is a $50 subscription service that includes access to five packs of multiplayer downloadable content. Unlike the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* downloadable content however, subscribers are given more than just maps. *Battlefield Premium* players get priority access to servers over non-premium members, as well as exclusive in-game weapons and vehicles, which non-subscribers do not have. Many multiplayer-based games like *Battlefield 3* utilize a progression unlock system (weapons or equipment are unlocked for player use based on time spent in game, completing challenges, or getting kills) that can take significant amounts of time. *Battlefield 3* also allows users to purchase "shortcut" kits for player classes that unlock all of the weapons and equipment instantly for that class. These shortcut kits run from 400 MSP ($5) for a single class to 2,000 MSP ($25) for unlocking equipment and weapons for all classes.

Additionally, there are special shortcut kits available for vehicle classes in the game. These range from 560 MSP ($7) to 1,440 MSP ($18). This approach effectively forces players to pay for content that already exists within the game (which they have already paid for) if they want it immediately. The idea may seem laughable to many, until they discover the amount of time it takes to unlock these weapons and equipment. For example, I have played *Battlefield 3* on my XBOX 360 for over 90 hours. At this point, there are several weapons and equipment that remain locked. My character in the game is level 44, out of a whopping 145 maximum levels. Some friends with which I regularly play have amassed over 640 hours of play time, topping out at the highest level possible. 640 hours equates to over *26 days.* The player must decide if a game is worth spending 26 days of his or her life playing, and if not, whether or not they should purchase a shortcut kit towards the full experience offered by the game. There is no other alternative – the modification of the console or save game data may result in the disabling of the player's ability to play online by the developer and strategy guides offer little assistance. The consumer is left with two choices – invest time or invest money. For the video game developer, either decision is fortuitous. Time is money.

Through my personal experience and a brief examination of the development of video games and consoles, it should be clear the industry has shifted in a new direction. Specifically, the industry is now focused on cultivating consumers to purchase downloadable content and influencing their perception of what is defined as the full experience while profiting heavily from these ventures. This differs from past approaches where the idea was to produce physical excessories for purchase, such as the Zapper or ROB the robot. Having established the history of video games and industry efforts to

cultivate consumption on the part of the consumer, I will now outline the importance of studying video games from a cultural perspective.

The Cultural Relevance of Video Games

When it comes to arguing for the cultural relevance of video games, years ago many scholars would have shunned the idea, believing the industry to be short lived or nothing more than entertainment. Although video games have existed for literally decades, the first academic journal wholly dedicated video games and exploring the rich culture of the genre, *The International Journal of Computer Gamer Research* was not established until 2001. Over time, an appreciation for the value of video game research has expanded. However, game studies remain underdeveloped, as evidenced by the comparative wealth of research on other mediums such as television. Over the course of this next section, I will illustrate the cultural relevance of video games.

Recall that on a monetary basis, the video game industry generates an estimated $66 billion in revenue annually (Reuters, 2011). Television and other media generate similar significant revenue on an annual basis. Freepress.net (2013) reports major media companies logged massive profits in 2011. Time Warner, Inc. posted revenues of $29 billion, Newscorp. recorded $33.4 billion, and Comcast logged revenues of $55.8 billion. On an economic basis, it is clear comparisons can be made and vouches for the importance of the examination of the video game field.

By comparing video games to their closest media cousin – the feature film – the cultural importance of the industry becomes more apparent. Films have been responsible for influencing the behaviors and attitudes of people, as well as serving as a major cultural industry. On a sheer monetary basis, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* sold more

than 6.5 million copies in the first 24 hours of its release, hauling in a mind-boggling $400 million. Parent company Activision, Inc. was quick to point out *Modern Warfare 3* grossed $1 billion in 16 days of sales – beating the mammoth film *Avatar*'s record by a day. While video games cost around $60, compared to a $10 movie ticket, it is clear the fiscal gap between the two has been closed. Keeping with the example of film as a cultural industry, video games are increasingly influential. In some early video games, like the World War II-era *Call of Duty*, players were treated to levels obviously adapted from film, such as the Volga River crossing scene popularized in the 2001 film *Enemy at the Gates. Call of Duty 2* also featured reproductions of scenes from the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* during the landings at Normandy beach on D-Day during WWII. This form of cross-marketing and synergy is not uncommon in video games – many feature films have video game adaptations. However, video games no longer only mirror cultural artifacts, they create them. Many video games now have their own film adaptations. Films like *Super Mario Bros., Laura Croft: Tomb Raider, Doom, Hitman,* and the *Resident Evil* series are all based on video games. Other video games like *Dead Space* and *Halo* have recently spawned direct-to-DVD animated films.

Video game culture also shares some of the same significant cultural hallmarks as television. Television viewers have their favorite shows or episodes. Video game players have their favorite characters, storylines, and games. Just as how television soap opera fans debate whether *General Hospital* was better than *As the World Turns,* gamers debate whether the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* franchise is superior. This fan devotion exceeds casual conversations between fans, cementing the cultural relevance of video games.

Many fans have taken time to create online *Wikipedia*-type articles on the lore of game universes, storylines, and the technical details of games. Others run fan websites with their own opinions or contributions to the fictional realm. Certainly countless hours are spent creating and maintaining these websites, although most of this work is unpaid. Many players (including myself) frequent online gaming forums, where video games are discussed and interpreted among a fanbase. Players with programming talents may create their own expansions or modifications to their favorite game, which can be coopted and commodified by the industry (some games such as *ARMA II*'s *DayZ* and *Skyrim*'s *Hearthfire* began life as fan work and were incorporated into the official game by the developer due to popularity). While the creators of *DayZ* and *Hearthfire* were actually compensated, most of those that engage in fan labor are not. This is analogous to fan films made by those who enjoy *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

In addition to having their own conventions like the *Electronic Entertainment Expo* (E3) or the *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX), video games have also begun to permeate conventions like *Comic-Con*, which traditionally catered to comic book and superhero fans. Thousands attend these expos annually, spending hundreds of dollars on travel costs and souvenirs. Similarly, costume-play or "cosplay" (an activity common to expos where fans dress up to resemble their favorite character) now often sees women dress up as Chell from the video game *Portal* or men as Altair from the *Assassin's Creed* video game series. These costumes are often complex and fan-made, requiring dozens of hours and significant monetary resources to be realistic. Similarly, some video game characters are so culturally recognizable (*Angry Birds*) that children dress as their favorite video game character at Halloween time.

While most of the discussion on video game culture has been positive thus far (fan work, cosplay, etc.), certain negative aspects cannot be overlooked. Video games suffer a lot of bad press due the violent or sexual nature of many blockbuster games and highly-publicized incidents involving video games. Twenty years of violence-centric academic research has also tainted the industry. Although negative, these reports have thrust video games into the cultural spotlight.

In the wake of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, news media outlets placed much suspicion on the violent video game *Doom* (while mostly ignoring other factors), which was reported played frequently by the two gunmen. People began to question the power video game entertainment may have on the mental function of people, particularly children. In the years since, many scholars have attempted to tie violent video games definitively to aggressive and violent behavior. Incidents like the 2011 Norway Attacks, carried out by Anders Behring Breivik, only served to cement the pessimistic reputation of video games when it was discovered he had used *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* to train in the use of weapon optics. News outlets regularly focus on video games – particularly around the Christmas season, when most of the big, blockbuster video games are released (both *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* franchises typically release a new game around the months of October or November).

Academic research into the realm of video games seems rather limited in scope, however. Many authors have chosen to focus on the psychological relationship between violent video games and actions or thoughts (Anderson, 2010; Dinu, 2010). Others focus on educational benefits, but even fewer focus on the cultural impact of video games. Those that do, focus on fan culture. Of particular importance to this thesis is the work of

Dimitri Williams (2006a; 2006b), who has studied video games and cultivation theory, seeking to prove that long term exposure to video games will influence perceptions. I still feel that although academic studies of the video game field have become more commonplace, the field remains remarkably understudied, given the cultural significance of video games advanced by this chapter.

Whether or not any of these news reports or academic studies is substantial is irrelevant when arguing the cultural relevance of video games. The continued apparition of the topic in the daily news and scholarly journals points to an issue firmly cemented in the fabric of our culture.

Between all of these aspects of video games, it should be undoubtedly clear that the medium is a cultural force that will not fade away and will continue to influence many aspects of human communication in the future.

In writing the introduction to this thesis, I have been faced with not only the amount of money other people have spent on video game consoles, games, and accessories – but what I myself have spent. In the relatively brief span of time that I have owned my XBOX 360, I have spent hundreds of dollars on video games, accessories, and services for my entertainment. The complexity and race to have the latest and greatest devices and gimmicks has created the questions of, "how did we wind up here?" and "at what point does this activity become exploitative?" Video games began humbly with the success of *Pong* – a simple analog device that plugged into the television. The system cost $100 at the time, or roughly $600 by today's standard. There were no accessories and the system was self-contained. The industry has since changed. An entire culture has been created around video games and their content. Our purchasing habits have been

funneled in a direction more profitable for video game creators – slowly, surreptitiously, and deliberately. All the while, we are told games are improving – "evolving." But his process is not natural. We are cultivated by the video game environment. Messages within this environment are encoded by the video game industry which remains subject to many pressures and limitations in the vein of cultural Marxism. This thesis seeks to reveal these processes and understand how they occur. In the next chapter, I will examine theoretical frameworks, the concept of cultivation, extant video game studies on the topic, as well as the construction and purpose of producer studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A common theme in scholarly communication studies is the impact of a new medium on the human psyche, as well as the evolution of existing technologies. Just as radio, television, and other advancements have been examined, so too have video games. However, I feel there remains a definitive lack of study on the topic and speculation on if the medium is worth studying in an academic context. The thesis attempts to add to the academic conversation around video games by linking cultivation theory and cultural Marxism. As argued in Chapter 1, the video game industry represents a cultural machine with the power to impact everyday life and influence and manipulate the consumer. The first chapter of this thesis also discusses a real relationship between the producers of video games and the consumer. At the core of this relationship sits a communication structure. Messages are exchanged between the producer and the consumer. Producers encode messages with the intent of influencing consumer behavior, attitudes, and beliefs, while consumers decode these messages and communicate through their expenditures. These messages are subject to the pressures and limitations that influence the producer, but not necessarily determined by them. The consumer may or may not be conscious of these messages, but is still a recipient. I suspect producers deliberately attempt to cultivate consumers, and specifically the ways in which they consume. As such, this literature review will examine relevant theories and information pertinent to this topic. Chapter 2 is divided into six sections: new media, cultural Marxism, the encoding/decoding model of communication, cultivation studies, video game studies, and producer studies. These sections will serve the purpose of justifying, contextualizing, and situating this thesis, as well as building and contributing to theory. For the first section, I

feel it is necessary to situate video games as new media. This section will examine work, primarily by Lev Manovich, on defining new media. The section on cultural Marxism will provide a brief introduction to the approach, while providing a lens through which to understand the rest of the thesis. As the encoding of messages by video game producers plays a major role in this thesis, I will briefly examine the encoding /decoding model of communication. The section on cultivation studies will examine the traditional definition and use of cultivation theory in the medium of television and will then inventory cultivation research involving video games. By examining prior research on cultivation theory, it will illustrate how this theory is best equipped to approach the topic of video games and the encoding of messages by producers. Video game studies examine the scholarly research in the medium, as well as studies on video game culture. The inclusion of video game studies will strengthen the argument for the cultural relevance of video games and the decision to undertake this thesis. The final section of this chapter will examine producer studies, specifically the encoding of messages by producers (and the pressures and limitations that impact them). Message production and encoding make up significant parts of cultivation theory and will be discussed in detail below. These six sections will serve as a justification for the methodology used in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

New Media

Video games and downloadable content can be considered a form of new media as one of the key components distinguishing new media from old media is the interactivity associated with such a medium. Video games are by their very nature interactive, since the player does not passively observe events occurring before them. The act of playing is itself interactive. As downloadable content expands the video game

experience, it is also a form of new media. Additionally, Lev Manovich (2001) describes new media as possessing five major principles: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and cultural transcoding. Manovich defines numerical representation as the media's representation in digital code. Video games are comprised entirely of digital code, satisfying the first of the principles. Modularity refers to the "fractal structure of new media" (p. 51). Game elements like files are part of the video game itself. When assembled, these files provide the media experience of a video game. Automation is the culmination of numerical representation and modularity, which allows for processes to occur without human interaction. For example, Manovich specifically cites the complex AI (artificial intelligence) that controls characters in video games. Variability refers to the potential for changes to occur to the media. Video games can be modified over time (and are, according to respondents in Chapter 4) to accommodate new or different functions. Lastly, cultural transcoding is described as a multi-layered process. Manovich states there are two primary layers:

> The "cultural layer" and the "computer layer." The examples of categories on the cultural layer are encyclopedia and a short story; story and plot; composition and point of view; mimesis and catharsis, comedy and tragedy. The examples of categories on the computer layer are process and packet (as in data packets transmitted through the network); sorting and matching; function and
> variable; a computer language and a data structure (p. 63).

The cultural layer is transcoded into code for the console (which is essentially a specialized computer) to understand. Video games possess this multi-layered structure. From this comparison to Manovich's principles, it should be clear video games represent a form of new media.

Cultural Marxism

To effectively ground this thesis within its theoretical lens, in this section I will briefly outline traditional Marxism, late capitalism, and cultural Marxism. An approach to a Marxist theory of culture stems from the notions of traditional Marxism. At its core, traditional Marxism is primarily based on economics and the forms of production and consumption. One of the key aspects of traditional Marxism is the idea of the determining base and the determined superstructure. Williams (1980) describes the base as "the real social existence of man" and "the real relations of production corresponding to a stage of development of the material productive forces" (p. 33). The superstructure, on the other hand, surmises "all culture and ideological activities" (p. 32). This process functions under the bounds of capitalism as an economic system. Given the focus on video games and the digital, connected world, I specifically position my writing from the realm of late capitalism. Late capitalism reflects what Jameson (2000) calls the "Third Machine Age" of capitalist evolution in response to capitalism's increasing global reach. The machines of the age result in "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas" (p. 216). Video games and the digital space are no longer a precapitalist exception limited by technology. They are now being commodified in ways previously unavailable or unrecognized by the capitalist system.

Cultural Marxism investigates the relationship between the base and the superstructure in capitalism with an eye on how culture is created. Williams (1980) explains the base as a process, as opposed to a state (as would be defined in traditional Marxism). This process is revalued away from fixed economic or technological abstractions and towards the specific activities of humanity in "real social and economic

relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations..." (p. 34). These contradictions result in an ever-changing, dynamic process. The notion of the superstructure in Williams' cultural Marxism refers to "a related range of cultural practices" (p. 34). Instead of stating the base determines the superstructure, Williams subscribes to the idea that the base exerts pressures and limitations that shape and influence this interaction, rather than wholly determine it. To help examine some of these pressures and limitations exerted upon producer messages, I utilize the encoding/decoding model of communication.

The Encoding/Decoding Model of Communication

Messages encoded by the video game producer are at the center of the analysis for this thesis. As a result, it is necessarily to briefly examine the encoding and decoding model of communication advanced by Stuart Hall (1980). In this model, messages are encoded by producers and decoded by the viewer (the viewer in the case of this thesis being the player/consumer). The actual encoding of the message is influenced by the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and the technical infrastructure that impact the producer. These same pressures and limitations impact the viewer as they decode the message. Combined, the two parties form what Hall calls a "circuit of communication." Hall believes the meaning of the message is not determined by the encoder, but rather the decoder. The receiver of the message can decode the encoded message through a dominant (preferred) reading, a negotiated reading, or an oppositional reading (Hall, 1980). If the decoder makes a preferred reading, he or she accepts the meaning encoded in the message. A decoder who makes a negotiated reading accepts some of the meanings encoded by the producer in the message, but does not wholly make

a preferred reading. In contrast, an oppositional decoder rejects the messages encoded by the producer entirely. How messages are decoded is dependent upon the social identities of the decoder (shaped by the aforementioned frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and the technical infrastructure). Hall states "decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings," (p. 136) rejecting the notion of determinism as described in traditional Marxism and admitting room for freedom and praxis on the part of the recipient of the messages. This belief is also shared by Morley (1980). While the decoding process is an essential piece from a cultural studies standpoint, the focus of this thesis is upon the encoding of the messages by the producer. For Williams (1980) and Hall (1980), the encoding process is equally important to understand decoding. Unfortunately, the encoding process is often ignored. During the encoding process, video game developers frame their messages. Entman (2004) describes framing as an effort to define the limitations of a topic to make agreement from the decoder more likely. As such, these messages are interrogated to unveil not only the content of the messages, but the pressures and limitations that influence their creation. I believe constant exposure to these messages over time results in changes to the realities of the consumer, which is a major theoretical pillar of cultivation theory. I examine this theory next.

Cultivation Studies

Humans make sense of the world by forming their own understandings of events that occur within their lives. George Gerbner's traditional concept of cultivation theory identifies a potentially major influence on how these social realities (frameworks of knowledge) are formed. Cultivation theory specifically examines "independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner,

1998, p. 180). By this description, Gerbner states television has the ability to influence individuals' perceptions of the world. This is not to say consumers are entirely determined by messages created by producers, as traditional Marxists (like Adorno, for example) would argue through the notion of determinism. Rather, I believe video game producers also hold the ability, just as television or a friend has the ability to sway an opinion and that friend has the ability to disagree or argue in response. Cultivation theory is also one of the most commonly used theories in the world of communication studies. One study (Bryant & Miron, 2004) found it to be the third most utilized theoretical approach in the top three mass communication journals since 1956. Applications of cultivation theory have overwhelmingly targeted television as a medium and the content it broadcasts. Only recently, and after the death of Gerbner in 2005, did cultivation theory begin to take hold as a way to examine communication mediums outside of television. While Gerbner looked at the impact of television as a whole, some researchers have now applied cultivation theory to specific genres. To better understand how this theory will be applied to this thesis, a brief examination of the theory's tenets is required.

Gerbner's cultivation theory grew out of the examination of television specifically and its nature as a mass communication tool. The most familiar rendition of cultivation theory holds that "those who spend more time watching television are the most likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages in the world of fictionalized television" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 337). Such a statement suggests the function of television as a hulking cultural machine that can impart the values it carries to the masses. Gerbner (1970) likened mass communication to the mass production of messages and an "industrial-technological revolution into the

sphere of message-production" (p. 69). This medium possessed the technological ability to rapidly distribute messages that "create new symbolic environments that reflect the structure and functions of the institutions that transmit them" (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69). Under Gerbner's model of mass communication (and Hall's theory of encoding/decoding), producers of these messages hold a lot of power. As part of cultivation theory, "the mass-produced symbolic environment creates publics and reveals social and institutional dynamics; because it expresses social and cultural patterns, it also cultivates them" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). This mass communication not only cultivates behavior, but leaves behind a trail of clues as to who creates them and why. Again, this thesis will specifically attempt to uncover what messages are being created by video game producers, how the messages are encoded, and the pressures and limitations (such as industry or history) that impact producers.

Mass communication messages and the cultural power they possess depend heavily on the goals and intentions of the message producer. In television, Gerbner found most of these messages to be violent, since it was cheap to produce and entertaining (Griffin, 2012). While the producer's goal may have been to entertain, this approach to program creation was not without other, and perhaps unintended, consequences. Gerbner believed exposure to violence on television through entertainment programming or news would lead viewers to believe the world was more violent or unstable than it actually was. To prove his suspicions, Gerbner utilized what became known as the "Cultural Indicators" project. The project was designed to uncover states and trends in mass communication, and specifically in television. It did not only gather statistics on message production, but worked to uncover how the perceptions of the public are shaped. The

Cultural Indicators project accomplished this by being "historically grounded, theoretically guided, and empirically supported" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 179). For cultivation theory, Gerbner used a three-pronged process that included institutional process analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 338). I will examine each of these in detail below.

Firstly, institutional process analysis investigates "the organizational forms, power relations, and decision-making pressures and processes of the institutions that produce mass-mediated messages" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338). This prong of cultivation theory specifically examines the producer of television programming. Most major television producers and production houses are part of a massive conglomerate, such as Viacom, Disney, or News Corp. Smaller producers like local television stations are similarly owned, or are at least affiliated with major networks. Business structure differs little from corporation to corporation. Most companies are organized in a hierarchy, with a CEO or president at the top, laborers at the bottom, and different ranks of seniority in between. Decision-making pressures and limitations typically come from above and messages are tailored to the direction of the company elite and the producer policies. Monetary gain is the goal of a business within capitalistic society and is an expectation of a successful corporation. Profit must be maximized. These institutional processes impact the creation and encoding of mass media messages. Ownership and the associated political economy of communication impacts message encoding and content. While discussed in further detail later in this thesis, "Political economy refers to the study of the social relations, *particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources* [original emphasis]" (Mosco,

2009, p. 2). Recalling the earlier example used in this chapter, Gerbner believed violence to be inexpensive to create for television and entertaining. The result was its proliferation as an occurrence and as an acceptable policy in television, due to its profitability. During my research, I discovered a notable lack of studies examining the institutional analysis prong of cultivation theory.

Researchers seem content to emphasize message systems or attempt to discover a cause-effect relationship resulting from the long-term exposure to these messages. Little research has focused on the messages encoded by producers, instead focusing on what messages are decoded by consumers. I find this a serious oversight. Producers create many messages in a wide variety of ways: commercials on television, displays in stores, and the products themselves. All affirm one another. This prong plays a major role in the direction of this thesis and the reason for selecting a producer study. I directly apply this prong of cultivation theory to the field of video games.

The second prong, message system analysis, "investigates broad structures and consistent patterns in large bodies" of aggregated messages (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338). When discussing aggregated messages, Gerbner is not referring to specific genres or programs, but rather messages across mass media as a whole. The Cultural Indicators project accomplished this by tracking "the most stable, pervasive, and recurrent images in network television content, in terms of the portrayal of violence, gender roles, race and ethnicity, occupations, and many other topics and aspects of life, over long periods of time" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). A major part of cultivation theory research focuses on violence and due to his work quantifying such occurrences in television for over 30 years, Gerbner became known as "the man who

counts the killings" (Stossel, 1997, p. 86). This prong of cultivation theory is easiest to quantify and is the most frequent type of study.

The final prong, cultivation analysis, brings everything together. It focuses on the "study of the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate" (Gerbner, 1970, p. 71). It should be noted that this prong has been operationalized as television effects. Through this practice, cultivation researchers could hypothesize about how the masses would perceive a phenomenon or issue if their reality was based off of the dominant television portrayal of that particular phenomenon or issue. For example, Gerbner found heavy consumers of television (those that spent significant amounts of time watching television) miscalculated their risk of criminal victimization significantly more than those who were light television viewers (Griffin, 2012). He also found heavy viewers had an inflated perception of the number of people employed in law enforcement and were more suspicious of people (Griffin, 2012). Through cultivation analysis and comparing institutional and message analyses, cultivation researchers believe this is due to the fact television focuses heavily on victimization, mistrust, crime, and law enforcement. Similarly, heavy viewers of television are exposed to these messages more often and are thus more likely to accept them as reality. This "mean world syndrome" was explored through the use of surveys. To try and isolate the effects of television cultivation, surveys assessed "opinions, images, and attitudes, across a variety of samples, types of measures, topical areas, and mediating variables" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). These results were then compared them to a "television answer," which was created through empirically observing and cataloging the messages broadcast on the TV. This approach

resulted in many studies (ex: Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979) that claim heavy television viewing "cultivates exaggerated perceptions of victimization, mistrust, and danger, along with numerous inaccurate beliefs about crime and law enforcement" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). Similarly, other studies (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Signorielli, 1990) found television exposure also supported the belief that people are not trustworthy and are selfish. While certainly not everyone reflects the reality produced by television, the goal of this prong is to illustrate the potential for influence.

Over time, cultivation research has expanded from simply trying to uncover the impact of television on perceptions of the world. The field has now become far more specialized and specific, examining the effects of cultivation down to the genre (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). For example, some cultivation researchers support the idea that viewing television news results in ''heightened perceptions of crime risk on both a personal and societal level'' (Romer et al., 2003, p. 99). Regarding specific television genres, Woo and Dominick (2003) examined the impact of television talk shows on audience perceptions. They found people who watched talk shows exaggerated the frequency of marital infidelity, running away from home, and premarital sex. Glynn, Huge, Reineke, Hardy and Shanahan (2007) found that heavy viewers of crisis support-type shows would be more supportive of government policies protecting families. The researchers also found conservative listeners of these talk shows were more supportive of big government policies than they would normally be. Exposure to "makeover" shows was "negatively related to 'self-esteem' and positively related to 'perfectionism' and

'body dissatisfaction'" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 341). Goidel, Freeman, and Procopio (2006) found television viewing is associated with exaggerated perceptions of juvenile crime rates and the false belief that the penal institution is a more effective alternative to rehabilitation A cultivation study from Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2004) found viewing local and national news coverage was correlated with crime predictions, as well as support for the death penalty and gun ownership. The widespread use of cultivation theory to examine mass media messages has led to a solid position in established communication theories.

Cultivation theory as paradigm.

Many communication scholars, such as Morgan and Shanahan (2010), believe cultivation theory has gained a paradigmatic status, meaning it has survived the attacks and criticisms (Hirsch, 1980; Newcomb, 1978; Potter, 1994) levied against it in stride. Indeed, it has now ventured outside the realm of television violence, with some studies focusing on the cultivation of "sex-role stereotypes, political orientations and behavior, images of aging, health-related beliefs and behaviors, opinions about science, attitudes toward marriage and the family, work, minorities, sexuality, the environment, religion, affluence, and numerous other issues" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 340). As different kinds of media permeate the interconnected world, I argue additional dimensions of cultivation exist, including consumer behavior. This thesis will push the envelope of cultivation studies in a new direction by examining the messages encoded by video game producers for consumers, keeping in mind that "Gerbner simply asserted that long-term, ritualistic exposure to formulaic stories with consistent lessons would be expected to mean something to those who consumed them" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 349).

Constant exposure to messages encoded by producers to support consumption may impact consumer attitudes, behaviors, socialization patterns and cultural identification.

The concept of resonance also surfaces in cultivation theory. In this sense, resonance refers to the personal experience of the individual correlating with the topic at hand, which results in a magnified perception. For example, Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) found African-Americans in high-crime areas had a noticeably higher fear of crime than other groups. Others like Busselle (2003) discovered parents that watch more violent and crime television are more likely to warn their high school age children about crime. This has also been found to influence the crime estimates of their children.

Bilandzic (2006) has proposed the perceived distance of mass media content can impact the effects of cultivation. Others (Hetsroni, Elphariach, Kapuza, & Tsfoni, 2007; Van den Bulck & Vandebosch, 2003) contend this distance can be either geographical or conceptual, keeping in step with the idea of resonance. Resonance is a particularly important concept in this thesis. Video games are interactive. Players of video games have a direct relationship with producer messages. Not only are these messages geographically close (they are in the living room!), they are also mentally close. When logging into *XBOX Live* or any other console service, users are bombarded with information on the latest game or associated content. Friends invite friends to play games with them. Players are immersed in a structure and culture created by a corporation. While the player is not determined by this environment, this experience may magnify cultivation. Taking part in this structure and culture over time likely impacts the reality of the consumer. If a player has no option but to consume in a way dictated by the industry,

is exposed to this method of consumption constantly, and consumes within the structures of the industry, then all of these factors legitimize the reality encoded by the industry.

Although Gerbner was never particularly interested in how actually cultivation occurs, the theory evolved alongside cognitive explorations of the phenomena. The dominant understanding of how cultivation occurs surrounds the heuristic (experience-based) reception and subsequent processing of these mediated messages (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). In this view, "mental shortcuts used while processing TV messages incline heavy viewers to rely more on those messages when constructing judgments about the world, based on frequency, recency, and vividness" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 344). These mental shortcuts are divided into what are called first order and second order measures (Shrum, 2004). First order processes rely heavily on heuristic processing and are memory-based. Second order processes depend on attitudes and perceptions. Cultivation draws primarily from memory, but effects can be enhanced by attitudes and perceptions. Understanding how cultivation occurs cognitively is particularly important, given that the producers of mass media messages are trying to harness the thoughts of their audience. By not critically assessing incoming messages and relying on memory attained from producer messages, consumers may be more likely to act closer to the manner encoded by the producer. Video game producers attempt to reduce critical assessment of messages through cultivation, which is examined in Chapter 4.

Cultivation theory is not unchallenged in the academic field, despite its popularity (Williams, 2006). Several researchers, (ex: Hirsch, 1980; Newcomb, 1978; Potter, 1994) have suggested major flaws in the theory's methodology. Hirsch (1981) has claimed cultivation theory is nonfalsifiable and can explain anything. Imprecise content measures

are also cited as problematic. With such a wide variety of content in television, it is important to examine specific programming, instead of looking at the total time spent viewing content (Gunter, 1994; Potter & Chang, 1990). Potter (1991) claims imprecise exposure measures hamper the theory. Some studies are inconsistent in how they measure exposure, which makes it difficult to compare results between studies with markedly different measures. The discrepancy between television-world answers, real-world answers, and respondent conceptualizations is another criticism (Potter, 1991). Specifically, the context of events that occur in media is left out (Newcomb, 1978). Others (Cook & Campbell, 1979) have pointed out the classic "correlation does not mean causation" argument. The perceptions of people are not formed singularly by media exposure, and there are many variables at play that factor into this process. Similarly, there are differences between viewers and producers of media that should be taken into account (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). Every person is unique, as are the goals of mass media producers.

To address these critiques, cultivation theory supporters noted it was intended to generalize the impacts of television, not make specific predictions (Gerbner et al., 1994). This is directed at the criticism of Potter (1991) on the discrepancy between television-world answers, real-world answers, and respondent conceptualizations. To argue all consumers consume exactly as producer messages prescribe is ridiculous. Certainly producer messages are not the only communication driving purchasing decisions, but it is impossible to argue all consumers are aware of these messages, let alone critically assess them. Enter the notion of "mainstreaming," which refers to the homogenization of outlooks among heavy viewers of television, despite their cultural differences (Gerbner,

1998). The concept of resonance was also generated in response to criticism. Gerbner and other cultivation proponents (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1981) dismissed claims made by Hirsch (1981) as petty and disillusioned, contending studies were rigorous enough and many other researchers had found cultivation effects that existed even if Hirsch's critiques were acknowledged. Taking in stride the work done with cultivation theory, I attempt to apply Gerbner's work to video games, as well as tie it into cultural Marxism.

Cultivation and Video Games

Television has been the primary target of cultivation theory research for decades, with many researchers making claims about its influence on everyday attitudes, behaviors, and activities. As technology advances and audiences are redistributed between mediums, new studies follow. Since the 1980s, researchers have opened their eyes to the medium of video games, elevating it from an entertainment fad to legitimate research field. Recall that Gerbner's (1971) work focuses on a three-pronged approach, examining "institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies they cultivate" (p. 71). As there exists institutional processes and message systems within video games and the industry, there likely exists some form of cultivation. This section will examine scholarly work in the realm of video games, with an emphasis on studies examining cultivation effects.

Aside from historical work on the origin of video games and advancements in the technology (Dillon, 2011), many studies have taken a critical view of video games as a medium. Communication scholars have conducted research on profanity (Ivory, Williams, Martins, & Consalvo, 2009), the creation of hostility (Shafer, 2012; Ivory &

Kalyanaraman, 2007), racial stereotyping (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011), gender roles (Ivory, 2006), product placement in video games (Kim & McClung, 2010; Lee & Faber, 2007) and how video games impact driving behaviors (Dinu, 2010). Others in the field (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Sherry, 2001; Anderson, C.A., Berkowitz, L., Donnerstein, E., Huesmann, L.R., Johnson, J., Linz, D., Malamuth, N., & Wartella, E., 2003; Carnagey & Anderson, 2005) have gone as far as to claim media violence "increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts" (Anderson, et. al, 2003, p. 81), but their methods and approaches are mechanically different from cultivation theory. Fewer studies have examined positive effects of video games like the formation of friendships on online (Ledbetter & Kuznekoff, 2012) or their impact in education (Drahnak, 2009). Fewer still have approached video games through the lens of cultivation theory.

I will now outline pertinent video game studies specifically utilizing cultivation theory in the traditional sense used by Gerbner. An exemplar study by Dimitri Williams (2006a) found that online video game experiences with situations and dangers found only in the game succeeded in changing player perception of real-world dangers after just one month of play. In particular, Williams' (2006a) results show video game players are significantly more likely to fear robbery with a weapon than the control group that did not play video games. Williams also tested factors that did not have in-game parallels (such as rape and murder) but did not find significant cultivating effects. He also proposes cultivation may be dependent on how individuals organize their media diet. The media diet consists of an individual's exposure to media. With the expansion of video game popularity, people are spending more time with video games, instead of watching

traditional television. Personally, I do not watch television, and have completely replaced the medium with video games or internet content. In Williams' (2006a) U.S. study, heavy players of video games (those exhibiting the biggest cultivation effects) almost completely displaced television from their media diet, making video games the dominant item. This also argues cultivation can occur in other mediums outside of television and stresses the importance on the media diet. If video game players are exposed overwhelmingly to messages created by the video game industry, they are more likely to reflect those messages in their attitudes, values, and beliefs. Meanwhile, Van Mierlo and Van Den Bulck (2004) found those who played violent video games did give higher estimates for the prevalence of violent crime and the number of law enforcement officers in the workforce (in Belgium).

While there are similarities between television and video games as mediums, Van Mierlo and Van den Bulck's (2004) cultivation study also noted some key differences that may impact cultivation. The pair studied Flemish school children and argued for several points that separate traditional television cultivation from that of video game cultivation. The interaction viewers have with television and video games are different. Video games are interactive, while television is primarily a passive experience. Van Mierlo and Van den Bulck (2004) suggest the interactivity of video games impacts the player's cognition between first and second order processes in a manner detrimental to cultivation. Unfortunately, the pair does not take into account that this interactivity may actually magnify cultivation through resonance. Additionally, players of video games are able to take part in selective viewing (Van Mierlo & Van den Bulck, 2004). They are able to play what they want to play, when they want to play it and have a sense of agency.

People who watch television are subject to a flow of television programming outside of their control, unless they possess some sort of digital recording device that enables selective viewing. But does selective viewing even exist in the realm of video games? Recall the notion of mainstreaming as the homogenization of outlooks among heavy viewers to television (Gerbner, 1998); As long as viewers are exposed to television, their beliefs align in a general direction. Immersion in messages created by the video game industry seems likely to exhibit a similar impact. Van Mierlo and Van den Bulck (2004) also raise the issue that "Gerbner's cultivation analysis measures the long-term, cumulative contribution of consistent and largely unavoidable message patterns" (p. 100). This in turn questions if unavoidable message patterns exist in the video game world. Dimitri Williams (2006a) would likely argue for this view, especially if video games made up the bulk of an individual's media diet. While most studies on video games are not longitudinally designed (Williams' 2006a study was longitudinally designed over a span of 30 days), Van Mierlo and Van den Bulck (2004) state a large number of media studies have found time spent with violent media yields larger effects than total time spent.

It is rather shocking, given the proliferation of video games in popular culture and the displacement of television in the media diet by such a medium, that such a small number of studies examining the cultivating powers of video games have been conducted. Just as radio was displaced by television in the media diet, now television is losing ground to video games. Of the studies conducted on video games, none have attempted to illustrate the ways in which producers of video games attempt to cultivate the reality and consumption of consumers or examine the pressures and limitations

impacting the producer. They have, however, served to show cultivation does exist within the realm of video games. Cultivation manifests in the social and cultural patterns of society (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). As such, it is important to examine this culture, which is detailed below along with game studies.

Video Games and Gamer Culture

Video game studies have become more commonplace in the last few years with the continued integration of the field into academia. Video games are beginning also beginning to blur the lines of new media as the delivery model shifts towards digital distribution. It is important to examine forays into the field of video game studies in an effort to illustrate the state of current research. Additionally, such an examination helps articulate the goals and benefits of this thesis.

Video Game Studies

While still not as common as studies on television, studies on video games have canvassed a wide variety of topics. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Anderson (2010) and his associates have become well known for their efforts to link video games to violence, however, this is only part of the academic conversation on video games. Others, such as Squire (2002), Freedman (2001) and Funk (2001) have examined the cultural implications of video games outside of media effects area. Jenkins (1998) recognizes the gender biases that exist within video games. Kolo and Baur (2004) look at the social dynamics of online gaming. Martin (2011) even examines the dynamics of space within the video game. Most studies in this field of research that center on content analysis or consumer reception. Williams (1980) and Hall (1980) hold that the encoding process of message creation is as important a component as the decoding of the message. It is this

contribution I seek to make to the field of video game research. Another major area of study for video game academics is fan culture, which I examine next.

Gamer Fan Culture

Video games have a long, rich history of culture and associated social patterns. It is necessary to examine this "fan" culture briefly to raise the importance of the topic studied within this thesis. Additionally, gamer culture represents pressures and limitations upon the video game developer. Producers of video games influence this culture, but are also influenced by it. If producers ignore the input from the fan community, they may cause offense or outrage, leading to poor sales and profits.

Video games have grown from the 70's arcade hit *Pong* into truly verisimilitude combat simulators displayed on televisions at home. There are more than just a handful of genres, ranging from first-person-shooters to farming simulators. Because many people have been exposed to video games and enjoy them, quite a few cultures have developed around particular genres, games, or video gaming in general. These cultures generate stable, pervasive, and recurrent cultural artifacts that deserve to be examined, especially given cultivation theory's emphasis on the message system analysis (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Producers of video games also attempt to create their own culture, but this will be examined in the next section of this chapter.

Fan culture exists much the same for video games as it does for television. When examining what exactly is a fan or fan culture, Jenkins (2006) states "one becomes a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common

interests" (p. 41). Science fiction video game fans find themselves at home among *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fanatics. Fans of video games are extremely active in this culture and are able to express their views through any number of community avenues, such as online forums, Youtube.com, website comments, or even in-game with one another. Just as fans have done with their favorite television shows, video game fans have repurposed characters and storylines from their favorite games into entirely new narratives without the approval of the original creators. Jenkins (2006) claims "fan writing has achieved a semi-institutional status" (p. 42). Fans will often attempt to reclaim control of story elements in an effort to save them from misused by the producers if it does not mesh with established belief within the fan culture. With video games, some fans write fan-fiction, some hack and modify computer files, and some program and produce their own versions of video games to satisfy their entertainment needs. Scholarly studies have also examined fan culture in video games. Newman (2005) notes detractors of video games frame the medium as solitary, but others find it an extremely social activity. He suggests video games "provide a focus for critical discussion, talk and textual production, thereby acting as a pivotal point in the social and cultural lives of many players" (p. 50). Just as the community judges producer entries into the storyline, fan-made contributions to the various video game worlds are also judged and compared to game canon or lore (Newman, 2005). That which fails to meet the standards of the community faces retribution – as it would in any other social community. It could be outright rejected, critiqued, or accepted by fans, but the decision would likely not be unanimous. Scholars have begun to explore this fan culture, with particular interest in social behavior among gamers. Williams (2006b) found during a one month study that video games "improved

some global outlook and some online community improvement" (p. 651), but "some kinds of existing relationships eroded and the most social players became more insular" (p. 651). His research specifically found family relationships were not impacted by playing video games, but gaming lead to "sharp declines in extended friendship networks" and "physical face-to-face interactions" (p. 664). Williams did acknowledge that the social impact varies based on games and genres, noting players versus player (PVP) games are designed differently than cooperative games. In the latter, players work together and the more experienced players often mentor new players, which can cultivate players' real world perceptions (Williams, 2006b, p. 667). This type of game may also foster relationships, since many feature team-based action.

With the evidence provided, it should be clear there are many messages created on the topic of video games by fans and other cultural forces. This fan culture and its associated messages act as pressures and limitations upon the institution producing video games, but also repeat many messages created by the institution itself. Jenkins (2006) contends "for fans, consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable..." (p. 41). Messages beget more messages, all enforcing one another. Aside from culture created by gamers, the producers of video games play a major part in their interpretation. Recall that the first prong of Gerbner's three-pronged approach to cultivation specifically examines the institutional process and the efforts of producers. The next section of this thesis examines this prong in detail.

Producer Studies

The second and third prongs of cultivation theory have been covered in detail through the literature review of this thesis. I have covered cultivation analysis and

message system analysis thus far. Producer studies, or institutional process analysis, remains the most ignored in the field of scholarly research. Too few scholars have examined this political economy, the pressures and limitations upon the producer, and the encoding and production process of messages intended for the consumer. Recall that this prong investigates "the organizational forms, power relations, and decision-making pressures and processes of the institutions that produce mass-mediated messages" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338). This includes the pressures and limitations impacting the producer. Such pressures and limitations may include any force impacting the direction or content of the game. Similarly, when discussing producers or institutions, it is impossible to ignore the notion of political economy, which was earlier defined as "the study of the social relations, *particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources* [original emphasis]" (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). With the production of any form of media, the creative process is controlled or influenced by many global capitalistic forces. A handful of companies and individuals shapes and controls communication systems in the United States. These companies, including Comcast, Viacom, the Walt Disney Company, Time Warner, Microsoft, and Vivendi all possess great power through two types of integration, horizontal and vertical. Horizontal integration "takes place when a firm in one line of media buys a major interest in another media operation that is not directly related to the original business" (Mosco, 2009, p. 15) This allows a corporation to market its products through media convergence and message repetition. Vertical integration "describes the amalgamation of firms within a line of business that extend a company's control over the process of production" (Mosco, 2009, p. 15). These two types of integration thus amplify

the amount of power available by placing it in the hands of a limited few organizations and persons. Compounding the climate of political economies is the fact that corporations may seek joint ventures, strategic alliances, or other deals – concentrating power even further (Mosco, 2009). Such actions may result in an almost-monopolistic (and certainly oligopolistic) business climate. This means a reduced variety of messages from producers and more reiteration of the same messages. Thus, this focuses production into particular, repeatable molds that are profitable.

Producer studies allow for an inside look at the creative process of the corporate world. Sadly, video game research is again lacking in this category. No research has been conducted on the cultivation of video game audiences regarding their purchasing habits or perceptions. As a result, I will supplement the available information on the production of video games with scholarly research in television production, since cultivation theory is primarily concerned with that medium. This will provide a clear direction for study.

An organization with overt goals is among the easiest to examine from a producer studies standpoint. The U.S. Army has a very obvious goal when it encodes messages for consumers: recruitment. The majority of media produced by the armed services is made to serve this end. In addition to television commercials, the U.S. Army is also responsible for the photorealistic combat simulator *America's Army*. The program is free to download and play, and has garnered the attention of thousands of gamers. *America's Army* does double duty as entertainment and a recruiting tool (Lugo, 2006, p. 11). Fans of *America's Army* will sometimes compete in clan activities (organized, competitive, team play) for bragging rights. *America's Army* may be the official video game of the U.S. Army, but it is certainly not its only digital recruiting tool. Other intellectual properties

like *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* put the player in the boots of soldier in multiple branches of the United States Armed Forces – traveling around the world, taking part in exciting operations – and it doesn't cost the military a dime. All of these games stress realism, whether it is equipment or tactics. They are encoded to make the military life and values appealing. The Armed Forces benefits from the publicity of blockbuster combat-based video games, whether they intend to or not. Lugo (2006) argues video games like *America's Army* can last several hours, and during this time "potential recruits are conditioned. They are taught company values, techniques and etiquettes," (p. 14) in accordance with the recruitment goals of the producer. Through this video game experience, players are "ready for combat by the time they finish the last level…if all goes as planned, reality and fiction will become so blurred, gamers will not know the difference…" (Lugo, 2006, p. 14). Playing *America's Army* does not necessarily force you to sign up for the military, but Lugo (2006) has shown it has potential to influence your decisions (thousands of people have visited the game's website and clicked through to the U.S. Army web page for more information on military careers). This is the message encoded by the producers of the video game. Of course, fans may still conclude they are content with playing a free game and not going to war, but the influence of the producer is still present, albeit not totalizing. Players may (or may not) still accept a favorable view of the military, even if they elect not to enlist. This is not out of line with the producer's message encoding.

With such little information on the production of video games from the producer's standpoint, I am forced to default to the home turf of cultivation theory: television. Due to its relatively long history, television has seen significantly more producer study

research, although this is also limited. Levine (2007) undertook an examination of the production process of the hit soap opera *General Hospital*. During her on-set observations, she noted several pressures and limitations that influenced the content present on the television show. Production constraints like funding, company ownership structure, ratings, location, costumes, and employees were pressures and limitations in many aspects of the show. *General Hospital* was unique among soap operas, because of its massive popularity. Levine noted the show was entirely owned and produced by the Walt Disney company, which meant company executives met weekly with producers, writers, media relations experts, and those holding the monetary purse strings. This allowed Walt Disney significant dominion over content on the show (deciding which storylines were approved or modified, etc.), but it also meant a bigger budget. Levine emphasized profit was still the major driving factor for the show, citing ratings concerns and stressing "every task must be executed as efficiently as possible" (p. 138). More importantly, the author discussed the writing process for the show, and how the hierarchical structure of the production process limited and dictated what was approved for production. Gatekeeping, or media filters, (the censorship or editing of material by individuals within the hierarchical structure) also played a role. If something was deemed too extreme or out-of-place with the direction of the program by the producers, it was rejected or tempered. Audience feedback also influences some aspects of production. Levine (2007) revealed how fan mail is read by interns and summarized in monthly reports for the writing staff and producers. Negative or positive feedback might have resulted in changes to the show's storyline enacted by producers, which was part of the effort to stabilize and boost the popularity and profitability of *General Hospital*. Steemers

& D'Arma (2012) found many similar pressures and limitations influencing the content of television programming for children, such as competitors, advertisers, taste, and finances.

Real's (1996) empirical work on examining the production of the *Academy Awards* yielded additional information on the motivations of the producer. He argued the show was an effort to maintain the dominance of Hollywood in the film industry in the global market through a "technically and artistically sophisticated product that will have mass entertainment appeal" (Real, 1996, p. 161). Indeed, the vast majority of those who decide the winners of the awards live within the Los Angeles area. Real claims "everything in the [*Academy Awards*] ceremony [was] planned with regard to how effective it will be in serving the interests of the film industry" (p. 159). The ceremony is a big economic boon for the industry. Real stated "the annual awards ceremony funds most of the academy's annual expenses, makes profits for the television network, and promotes Hollywood films" (p. 160). This essentially boils down to a "widely viewed three hour advertisement..." (p. 160). In effect, the *Academy Awards* legitimizes and reinforces the messages created by the film industry as well as boosts its appeal. Real (1996) went as far as to call the *Academy Awards* "the world's longest commercial" (p. 157). The focus of the author's study is not to examine the actual impact the program had on the audience, but rather to illustrate the messages encoded in its production and the pressures and limitations that shape those messages.

To examine other manners in which producers impact production, Saha (2012) emphasized the power of gatekeeping (as a pressure and limitation) in a production setting. By examining how Asian minorities were portrayed on television, she found

producers reinforced the dominant perception of Asian minorities because it was found more interesting to audiences. If Asians were portrayed outside of this zone, it was often in a shocking or controversial manner designed to generate audience or publicity (Saha, 2012). Like Levine, Saha attained much of this information by interviewing the producers of television programming. Similarly, Hilt and Lipschultz (1999) found television producers focused on exciting and sensational news coverage, leaving out certain demographics. In particular, stories about elderly do not usually wind up on air, unless they are victims of crimes or scams (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1999). Armstrong (2006) examined how content is for women is determined in newspapers and found producers' ownership and internal policies played a major role in determining a focus towards women's content. He also found "characteristics of female audience members were not significant indicators of a focus on women's issues, suggesting that news organizations are setting the agenda for attracting women readers with little regard to public opinion within their community" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 457). In the end, "the news producer's views of their audience preferences appear to carry the most weight in determining how content for women appears in print" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 458). This illustrates the amount of power held in the hands of the producer over their product and the audience.

Up to this point, I have examined several producer studies. Most examined the medium of television and the influence of the producer over the programming. It is important to recognize the congruencies between the organization of television producers and video game producers. Video game corporations mirror the business structure of other mass media conglomerates. Electronic Arts owns several labels and studios. It is organized into four labels: EA Games, EA Sports, EA Maxis, and EA Bioware. Each of

these labels oversees several studios tasked with creating video games or associated content. While EA is at the top of its own publishing chain, Activision-Blizzard, Inc. is not. The publisher controls several studios, which also produce video games, but is owned by multinational mass media giant Vivendi. The pair still represents only part of the video game medium's big players, but the example is sufficient enough to illustrate the pressures and limitations influencing production. For a game to get the green light, it has a long way to travel and will be modified several times by several levels of the overarching conglomerate. The game must fit within one of the profitable molds prescribed by the publisher. As a result, there can be a loss of creative freedom. As with any capitalist and profit-focused industry, a project labeled too controversial, financially risky, or too far outside the profitable mold, is either turned down or heavily modified. Just as television producers attempt to drive audience in line with their goals, so too do video game producers. Profit remains the number one goal of these corporations. A producer study would best enable researchers to examine the production process of messages in the video game medium and unravel the important questions of "who creates what" and "why?" A producer study would also be useful for examining the pressures and limitations upon the video game creator. To date, no studies on video games or cultivation theory have thoroughly examined the role producers play in creating and reinforcing the commodification of digital content and the reality of the player. Additionally, this thesis will contribute to the discussion by helping map the pressures and limitations inherent in the political economy of the industry.

Conclusions

Over the course of this literature review, I have examined a wide variety of studies involved in the topic at hand. Specifically, I have defined cultivation theory and examined studies relating to the three prongs of message system analysis, cultivation analysis, and most importantly, institutional process analysis. Through the use of scholarly studies, I have cemented the importance of institutional process analysis in the search for evidence of cultivation. It is this prong that will be the focus of this thesis. As was shown by example, the producer study best compliments this prong. Additionally, I have examined scholarly articles directly linking cultivation theory to video games as well as outlined a robust argument for the importance of video game culture. It should be abundantly clear at this point that a study examining the messages encoded by producers for consumers regarding their purchasing habits is a worthy effort. This thesis will contribute to the field of communication studies through the examination of messages encoded by producers, how the producer frames these messages, and the pressures and limitations impacting the producer (such as political economy). The next chapter of this thesis will outline the methodology for conducting such a study in line with the literature on the subject.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Throughout this thesis I have introduced the idea that video game producers encode messages with symbols to cultivate their beliefs, values, and behaviors in gaming audiences. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I have selected the U.S. video game developer Tacit Games (a pseudonym) as the developer for this case study. This chapter will focus specifically on examining my guiding research paradigms, justifying my method of a case study, outlining my sampling criteria, gaining access to an organization, ethical concerns, interviewing, data analysis, and verifying the results of this study. Prior to examining research paradigms, a simple overview of the study is in order.

I visited Tacit Games to interview those who encode messages for the consumer. This video game developer has several major, successful titles (which are outlined at the start of Chapter 4) and is currently developing additional games. The developer in question has also created downloadable content for their current games. This positions Tacit Games as an ideal case study. To begin, I examine Tacit Games' products in a historical context, looking at games that have already been completed. One franchise in particular will be examined, *City Mayhem* (a pseudonym). I interview five senior employees for approximately 60 minutes each. By interviewing those responsible for framing messages for the consumer, I provide insight into the message encoding process. I go behind typically closed doors to study what happens behind the scenes. I collect and analyze this data through a cultural Marxist lens looking for major pressures and limitations as well as efforts by producers to expand commodification, and cultivate consumer beliefs, values, and behavior. I begin by detailing the research paradigms guiding this thesis.

Guiding Research Paradigms

In this section I discuss the research paradigms driving the direction of this thesis. This thesis combines two research paradigms, critical and interpretive, as part of the cultural Marxism approach. Paradigms are "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn, 1970, p. viii). The critical paradigm "questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice" (Bronner, 2011, p. 1). It also "insists that thought must respond to the new problems and the new possibilities for liberation that arise from changing historical circumstances" (p. 1). This paradigm is especially appropriate for this thesis, since I am examining messages encoded by producers and destined for consumers, in new circumstances created by the advent of video games and their changes over time. Video game producers have a huge influence on those that consume their product. By examining the encoding process of producer messages, liberation is attained through recognition of the messages by the consumer (this study will not examine consumer recognition or decoding, instead I focus on the producer). To best examine the process of message encoding by producers, interpretive methods are required. The interpretive paradigm essentially argues "one needs to see a social situation from the point of view of the actors in order to understand what it happening in that situation" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 30) and this is most easily done through qualitative research. As a result, data collection methods advocated by this thesis are based on qualitative methods, which will be discussed in a later section.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, Cultural Marxism involves examining the relationship between the production, reception, and interpretation of cultural artifacts

through historical contexts. This also includes the pressures and limitations that impact the formation of culture. Such relationships link directly to cultivation theory's examination of institutional message analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis. By applying the Marxist concepts of superstructure and base, the relationships become even clearer. Williams (1980) describes the superstructure in the simplest terms as "the reflection, the imitation, or the reproduction of the reality of the base..." (p. 131). These reflections manifest in culture. This description implies the two concepts are linked and not independent. The base is described by Williams (1980) not as a state, but rather a process involving economic and material conditions. Moreover, it is described as "specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations..." (Williams, 1980, p. 132). These relationships and contradictions produced by the base form meanings surrounding profit and consumption that influence the superstructure. By this description, it may seem one-sided, but the base is constantly changing and so too is the superstructure. Culture is determined through this constant interaction. In cultural Marxism, limits and pressures influence the meanings found in the superstructure. Williams (1980) writes:

> For while it is true that any society is a complex whole of such (social) practices, it is also true that any society has a specific organization, a specific structure, and that the principles of this organization and structure can be seen as directly related to certain social intentions, intentions by which we define the society, intentions which in all our experience have been the rule of a particular class" (p. 36).

Within this quote we see a description of determinism in action. Traditional Marxism holds the base determine everything that happens in culture. For Williams (1980) and cultural Marxism, the base is instead a set of limits and pressures that are always existent. To understand the message encoding process, it is essential to identify and understand

these limitations and pressures. These set parameters and direction for the creation of culture. A goal of this thesis is to break down and understand the intentions of this base by examining the symbols and meanings encoded by the video game producer. Within the realm of the video game, the producer is the manifestation of the ideological, capitalistic base. By examining the base conditions, like messages created by developers, elements of these base conditions will manifest in the superstructure or culture. So, to best understand a major component involved in the cultivation of cultural practices, which include consumption (the superstructure), the relationships between the consumer and producer (the base) must be examined. Applying Stuart Hall's (1981) encoding/decoding model to this relationship is logical. Every message created by a video game developer is encoded in a certain manner with an end goal in mind this goal is to use symbolic messages to best cultivate a loyalty to the capitalistic logic of the base. This messages can be either covert or overt. Consumers then decode this message and are influenced in some way by this information (they can take a dominant, preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading to the message). Again, this fits readily into cultivation theory, which holds that the more similar messages received, the more likely decoders are to make judgments (dominant or preferred) based on the encoded messages. A producer study with directed interviews is placed perfectly to investigate the relationship between consumers and producers. Through asking producers directly (the first prong of cultivation theory), their encodings become clearer. The data collected by this thesis offers evidence to show the encoding efforts of producers to influence the reality of the consumer. I now examine study design of this thesis in more detail.

Study Design

Given the discussion of the critical and interpretive paradigms, cultural Marxism, and cultivation theory in the previous section of this thesis, the case study supplies the best fit for data collection. Case studies focus on the complexity of a single situation, rather than a broader picture (Stake, 2008). By expending all research energy into a lone situation, the data collected is likely to be deep and detailed. Because the relationship between video game producers and consumers is a complicated one, a case study is the best choice for understanding the complex matrix of meanings involved. No other method of study affords the same level of benefits. The direction of the case study is focused even further by examining only the encoding of messages by producers in a cultivation context and examining the institutional structure.

When looking only at the prong of institutional message analysis, I examine any identifiable complexities that may influence the encoding of producer messages (Stake, 2008). These complexities may be any information regarding messages created by the video game producer that are encoded for the consumer, as well as pressures and limitations. At the same time, "we cannot understand this case without knowing about other cases" (Stake, 2008), so I bring up comparisons to other video game developers. However, it should be clear that this case study is bounded within a single video game developer and only messages encoded for the consumer. I now outline more specific details of my proposed case study.

The case study I conduct in this thesis follows the path of an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). Instrumental case studies examine a particular case to "provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Stake, 2008, p. 137). With an

instrumental case study, the case itself is "of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and facilitates our understanding of something else" (Stake, 2008, p. 137). Such a case study fits the approach of this thesis appropriately, given the desire to understand the encoding of messages by video game producers for consumers. The case's details will provide a solid basis for the analysis of message encoding on the part of the video game producer. Now that I have examined that rationale for utilizing a case study to gather information for this thesis, I outline the reasoning behind by sample selection.

Sampling

As noted in the earlier section on study design, when selecting case studies as the method of choice for data collection, criteria must be outlined. Case studies are chosen deliberately based on their uniqueness and interest to the researcher. This study includes two types of sampling units – the site and the persons (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). When selecting the site, Tacit Games meets all of the necessary requirements to be considered a major video game developer, is based in the Midwest, and is active in the creation of downloadable content. Tacit Games has over 200 employees and has historically created several major video game titles with unique intellectual properties. It very much resembles other major developers in size and business structure. The developer has been producing video games for nearly two decades, with several games on the current generation of video game consoles. Tacit Games is also active in the creation of downloadable content for its titles. It is owned by a large media corporation and publisher. In these important aspects, the case study developer is significantly similar to most major video game developers. There is a clear expectation that data gathered from this case study could potentially be generalized to other developers based on these

grounds. However, the results of a case study may be a poor representation of the larger population, since it is intended only to represent the particular case (Stake, 2008). Case studies are also useful for theory-building and suggesting direction for further research (Stake, 2008). Data collected at the video game developer may lead to a new understanding of the message encoding process or suggest areas for future research. Tacit Games has thrived in the volatile atmosphere of development for nearly two decades. Being a large, successful video game developer is preferable over smaller companies, since they may not make games for video game consoles – or titles of the same quality. Other reasons for selecting the developer in particular include the limitations of travel distance, cost, and the amount of time needed to properly conduct the study. By its nature, the sampling method used to select this developer is purposive. As a result, this type of non-probability sampling is the most beneficial, especially since results need not be generalized beyond the sample, which is typical of producer studies.

When discussing the sampling method for respondents, it is important to select individuals who have "had experiences, or possess knowledge and/or expertise, that are important to the research questions" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 121). The method I used to select these informant interviewees is also purposive. By selecting these particular individuals, I gather the most targeted information possible that is relevant to my research questions. Five individuals were chose for this study: A producer, two associate producers, a senior programmer, and a studio design manager. All are senior members of the Tacit Games staff with direct involvement in message creation for consumers. Interviews with these respondents lasted for approximately 60 minutes, each. These interviews were organized in a semi-structured manner, meaning respondents were asked

some pre-prepared questions (listed in Appendix, p. 175) while allowing for the conversation to deviate based on responses. This allows for greater flexibility, but also means discrepancies in the questions asked between interviews. I discuss additional details on interviewees in the data collection section, but I will now transition to the issue of access.

Access

Access was the most daunting factor in conducting the study necessary for this thesis. By all accounts, businesses are secretive of industry practices. They also perceive little benefit from allowing access, which places the researcher at an immediate disadvantage (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Downloadable content and the practice of pricing remain somewhat controversial and Punch (1998) states a research object's nature can play a significant role in the amount of access granted for research. I obtained permission from Tacit Games and discussed the terms of access (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These terms included:

> How long the project will take, what kind of role the researcher can or should assume, the areas available for study and those that are off-limits, when the researcher can enter and exit the scene (or how many interviews can be done), and the kinds of resources the researcher may need (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 101).

To address these concerns, I had to speak with a gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is "the person or group who has the authority to negotiate and approve research access in a group or organization" (p. 101). Identifying this individual or group is vital to conducting the desired research. In the case of Tacit Games, I spoke with the studio production manager. While Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note "it is not unusual for final approval to come down from the highest levels of an organization" (p. 101), this was not problematic, although

respondents could not discuss particular topics, which are outlined in Chapter 4. I provided written documents, including a study proposal, consent form, and list of questions for the semi-structured interview beforehand. As suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), I structured the proposal in a way to present itself of practical value to the site. I researched Tacit Games at length, took care in the presentation of myself and my proposal, minimized promises and made only those that could be kept, and consulted with the gatekeeper (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Also beneficial to gaining access is that Tacit Games promotes a relatively open environment, offering online "tours" of their facility and developer history, contact information, as well as direct transcriptions of presentations made by staff at industry fairs. Some of this information was beneficial in providing data and preparing for interviews. Now that I have discussed major concerns with access, it is necessary to outline a solid ethical position for my research, since gaining access to a site means gaining trust. The betrayal of this trust would be detrimental to the video game developer, myself as a researcher, my research, or even the institution I am associated with. As a professional, I was obliged to conduct research as ethically as possible.

Ethics

Ethical concerns are a major consideration for this thesis, given the interaction with people in a highly-competitive workplace environment (video game developers are secretive about products in development). These concerns arise because a form of deception might have been necessary over the course of the study. Because the approach of this thesis is culturally Marxist, I initially felt it may prove difficult to gain access or develop trust with the subjects involved in a capitalistic company. However, I was able to

freely ask questions and received answers within the limits set by company policy. As a research instrument, I struck a balance between a critical scholar and ethical researcher. I alone interviewed subjects during my study, so ethical concerns are particularly important. Punch states many researchers are encouraged to enter the field with a "nebulous explanation of purpose" (p. 91). This approach resonates with the writings of Lindlof and Taylor (2002) on alternative ways to present the project to subjects. They claim this is not deception, but rather alternative. I introduced the project as a study on the progression of the company's products and business practices, as well as the success of downloadable content. This tactical framing of questions allowed me to attain the required information without exposing the nature of my study, which might have been viewed as disruptive towards their stated capitalist goals of profit. If this practice is even to be considered "deceptive," it should be seen as the least egregious and was minimized through maintaining confidentiality and removing identifying information, as well as debriefing the developer after the study is complete. I felt I was courteous at all times and represented the university in a positive manner.

This project adheres to two main tenets outlined for qualitative research: attaining voluntary, informed consent from all subjects, and presenting a valid research design that could produce results beneficial for the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To ensure ethical standards are met, a research proposal was sent to the Eastern Illinois University Internal Review Board and subsequently approved. Participants in my thesis research were required to give written and verbal consent (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Additional ethical concerns were minimized since contact with those unable to give informed consent, such as children or other vulnerable populations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) did not occur.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note that the accumulation of data on the part of the researcher may be unnerving to those interviewed or observed. I assured respondents that all data gathered will be kept confidential, which helped allay any concerns. Additionally, only the thesis committee and I have access to the information collected. The data is kept in a secure location and will not be discussed with anyone outside of the thesis committee. Lastly, identifying information, such as the developer's name or the names of respondents, has been redacted or replaced with a pseudonym in the interest of protection for the researched parties (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Interviewing

A case study can draw information through six primary avenues which include the following: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 1994). I gather information primarily through interviewing. This qualitative research method is the most beneficial, since I am examining the process of how messages are encoded by producers of video games. Interviewing results in targeted information and offers context and insight to relationships between various factors within the case study (Lindlof, 1995; Stokes, 2003; Yin, 1994). As a cultural Marxist, I sought information specific to research questions within this thesis. I am the research instrument, and as a result, imbue data collected with my own perceptions. Specifically, I interview employees at the video game developer who are responsible for making decisions regarding message encoding. The basic objectives of interviews, as suggested by Lindlof (1995) help understand the perspective of the video game developer, the communicative properties of video games, and distinct language. The personal perspectives of producers also validate, verify, and comment on data, as

well as test my hypotheses (Lindlof, 1995), provided that the information supplied by respondents is accurate. Five interviews were conducted during a visit to Tacit Games in question. After the interviews, I felt this number was adequate since I obtained enough information to reach saturation and fairly represent the actions of producers. The interview protocol is listed within the appendix section of this thesis (p. 175). Examples of questions include: "As a video game producer, can you walk me through the traditional process of video game creation?", "When it comes to the creation of video games, can you discuss some factors that influence your work?" "Does the publisher have a say in the development process?" "Where does the money come from for development costs?" "What is the most successful game this developer has created? Why do you think that occurred?" and "What exactly is the purpose of downloadable content?" Although questions were provided to respondents beforehand, respondents were also informed that interviews would be conducted in a semi-structured manner, with room for additional exploratory questions. I established rapport with the interviewees to ensure productive talks and utilized non-threatening, non-directional questions. It is important to recall that interviews are "speech events informed by norms and rules, in which every utterance and nonverbal sign contributes to the social reality created in the interview" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 176). As such, interview protocol and the general direction it provided during the interviews served as a good device for the facilitation of interviews. Following the guidelines described by Lindlof for assessing interviewees (1995, p. 171, 178), I interviewed those who are the most knowledgeable about my thesis topic and had the greatest time flexibility. With the assistance of the studio production manager,

respondents were screened for their willingness to talk and an availability schedule was developed (Lindlof, 1995).

The location and schedule of where and when the interviews were allowed to be determined by the respondent. Interviews occurred at the Tacit Games main office in a small, private meeting room and were recorded, with consent, on a discrete digital voice recorder to obtain a verbatim record and free up attention for deeper involvement in the verbal interaction (Lindlof, 1995). Detailed field notes were also taken (Lindlof, 1995). These field notes included details like the reconstruction of events, important chronological orders, and interviewer or observer thoughts at the time of note-taking (Lindlof, 1995). Field notes also recorded additional contextual information related to message encoding that is necessary to analyze the data collected (Lindlof, 1995).

Data Analysis

Through field notes, interviews, and thick, rich description, a substantial amount of information was collected that is categorized according to its topic or situation in Chapter 4. Data collected through interviews was transcribed, coded, and the prepared for analysis. Realistically, all of the information gleaned through the efforts of this thesis was not used. As such, data was prioritized based on its use-value after a close reading (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211). Transcribing the data ensured accuracy, while codes (emerging schemes) "...serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile, and organize data" (Charmaz, 1983, p. 111). These codes are used to categorize "persons, behaviors, settings, time periods, events, activities" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 220). Categorization's goal is "identifying a chunk or unit of data... as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon" (Spiggle, 1994, p.

493). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe a category as "a covering term for an array of general phenomena: concepts, constructs, themes, and other types of 'bins' in which to put items that are similar" (p. 214). At this level I detail the specific situations of interviews and observations. The next level of codes "characterize[s] concepts, beliefs, themes, cultural practices, or relationships" (p. 220). It is here I look for data related to message encoding, producer goals, and cultivation. These codes develop through preliminary and close readings of the data (transcripts, recordings, memo-writing, etc.), which are then carefully interpreted. To ensure this information is accurate, I followed a stringent verification process.

Verification

Lindlof (1995) describes verification as questioning "whether the research instrument is accurately reporting on the object of interest" (p. 237). He also notes "the interpretive paradigm recognizes the constantly changing character of cultures, perceptions, and forms of action" (p. 238). As such, time is best spent seeking credible, dependable data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and inspiring confidence that accurate interpretations have been achieved (Lindlof, 1995). Because the world consists of multiple, constructed realities, there are many potential interpretations of data (Lindlof, 1995). I stand the best chance of "arriving at very plausible interpretations" (p. 238) if competing interpretations are evaluated incisively. To this end, I employ the techniques of triangulation, member checks, and thick description (Lindlof, 1995). Triangulation as defined by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), refers to the "comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest" (p. 240). The most common form of triangulation is the combination of multiple methods of data collection (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through

such triangulation, the "validation of the claim is enhanced" (p. 240). Recall that data collection for this thesis includes both interviewing and physical artifacts (such as the examination of the games and associated downloadable content). I examine the data gathered from these methods for converging evidence of cultivation efforts through message encoding. This included the collection of thick, rich data through interviewing, but also extensive research. I examined the history of Tacit Games, public documents (such as annual and quarterly reports) and the video games themselves. This includes specifically looking for messages referenced by respondents within the products created by Tacit Games. It is this triangulation of methods within a case study that holds the key to understanding the phenomena outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 in the greatest amount of detail. I have found other methods of data collection problematic. Member checks occurred continuously throughout the interviewing process. I offered "individuals who are both 'insiders' (to the culture) and 'outsiders' (to the project)" (p. 241) the opportunity to critique the project. This includes the individuals that I interview, as well as my thesis committee. Lindlof (1995) states "new information and insights may also be gleaned during member checks that can be added to the database" (p. 241). Rich, thick description ensures data is collected accurately through accurate, contextual field notes and verbatim recordings. I utilize all of these verification methods to bolster the accuracy of my study.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have laid out my guiding research paradigms, justified a case study, and discussed sampling, access, ethics, interviewing, data analysis, and validity. As a result, I was well-equipped to conduct a study examining the encoding of

messages by video game producers, regarding the cultivation of consumer beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. By utilizing the methods advocated by this section, I maximize the potential of this study. I have found video game producers do encode their messages with a certain intended interpretation. Particularly, I believe video game developers attempt to influence the purchasing behavior of consumers and cultivate them to consume outside of the console and game disc. I also uncover evidence that this activity has occurred over a long span of time (as early as *City Mayhem 1,* in the case of Tacit Games), keeping in step with the tenets of cultivation theory. The details of my findings are discussed in the next chapter of data analysis.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Throughout this thesis, I have stressed the importance of the relationship between the producer of video games and the consumer. Both negotiate the culture of the video game industry. Producers seek to cultivate the ways in which consumers consume for more profit, while consumers seek a better entertainment experience. I have illustrated several instances in which messages are encoded by producers, destined for consumers. These messages and their encoding is at the center of my analysis. To this end, I restate my research questions from Chapter 1:

> RQ 1: What messages are encoded by Tacit Games to cultivate consumers and what pressures and limitations influence these messages?
>
> RQ 2: In what ways does Tacit Games attempt to cultivate consumer behavior?
>
> RQ 3: How does Tacit Games attempt to frame messages surrounding its products?

I believe that through the mass mediation of such messages, producers are able to cultivate consumer behavior. I detail my approach to answering these questions in prior chapters.

The key to this analysis is the respondent interviews analyzed through my cultural Marxist lens. This data provides an inside look to the way that producers encode messages for consumers. In this chapter, I examine the findings of these interviews in detail. To aid in the comprehension of topics and to better situate the data collected from respondent, I provide an historical examination of the base in the cultural Marxism framework of video games (I do this through the examination of relevant literature, popular culture, etc.). After this examination, I interrogate the three main themes that

emerged from respondent interviews, the structure of the video game industry, the nature of video games, and consumer cultivation. All of these themes influence the creation of culture. First, I begin with an examination of the base.

Examining the Base

Recall that when Williams (1980) examines cultural Marxism, he works to step away from the traditional static notion of the base and superstructure. For him, the base is a process, rather than a state and the more important concept of the two when understanding the cultural process. It is for this reason I conducted a case study on one of the productive forces in the process of video game creation. Tacit Games encodes and enacts the base of capitalism in an effort to influence the negotiation of culture formed in the superstructure by the player. This is part of an effort to create and maintain dominant position. Williams (1980) emphasizes domination is something that is "continually renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token… can be continually challenged and in certain aspects modified" (p. 38). Developers like Tacit Games constantly modify their approaches in an effort to maintain their influence on culture formation, but remains subject to the pressures and limitations of the base. Williams does not note who renews, recreates, and defends this dominance, but it stands to reason it is the base that seeks control of the superstructure. The evolution of Tacit Games' products and economic models not only reflects the attempts to be profitable, but attempts to create and influence dominant ideology. To better understand this in the context of Tacit Games, I provide more historical background and illustrate changes in the process of the base over time.

The changing conditions of the base.

Tacit Games has been making games dating back to the late 1990s, however their business model has evolved significantly since then, in line with late capitalism and its expansion into uncommodified space. This evolution includes the shifting of the company's products, economic strategies, and changes to how they conceptualize video games for the consumer. As these aspects of Tacit Games change, so too does the process of the base. Williams (1980) stresses the function of the base as a process. It is "the real social existence of man" (p. 33) and never uniform or static. This complex existence is reflective of the capitalist environment in which the creation of culture takes place.

Tacit Games' core product growth.

By placing the evolution of Tacit Games' intellectual properties (IPs) in a historical context, it becomes easier to examine changes over time. I will now examine these changes by providing examples using fictionalized names for intellectual properties. *Space Combat Jumper* was published in 1995 as a standalone game and spawned a sequel in 1996. Similarly, *Universe Wars* released in 1998 and also spawned a sequel in 1999. Neither of these games was expanded beyond the box. Between 2000 and 2005, the developer created an additional two intellectual properties. *Fantasy RPG* was born in 2000 and the sequel released in 2002. *Rogue Planet* was released in 2001 and its sequel was published in 2002. The developer's last standalone game (a title without downloadable content), *Antihero,* was released in 2005. *Rogue Planet: Revolution* released in 2009, while *Rogue Planet: Resistance* released in 2011. The games of primary focus in this study belong to the *City Mayhem* intellectual property. *City Mayhem* released in 2006, followed by *City Mayhem 2* in 2008, and *City Mayhem 3* in 2011. *City*

Mayhem 4 is slated for release in late 2013. From these examples and the associated sales figures, it is clear Tacit Games' most popular franchise is *City Mayhem*. As a result, the developer has focused its efforts on improving this product.

Examining changes in economic models.

Over time, the economic models of the video game industry have evolved. Examining Tacit Games as a case study provides an interesting window into these changes, which become easier to examine when situated historically. Microsoft released the XBOX 360 in 2005. Sony and Nintendo released the PS3 and Wii respectively in 2006. While earlier consoles dabbled in the use of the internet, the technical infrastructure did not yet exist to make on-line gaming successful. In contrast, the current generation of consoles (XBOX 360, PS3, Wii) was structured from the ground up to fully support the use of the Internet. This meant changes for the conditions of the base. Developers like Tacit Games no longer had to release products on disc. Content could be downloaded right to the console. This enabled the expansion of the product outside of the box and altered the methods of distribution. Prior to this development, developers like Tacit Games would release games every couple years, going large amounts of time without significant income. To solve this problem, some developers, including Tacit Games began integrating downloadable content into their economic model.

The growth of downloadable content in the City Mayhem franchise.

To easily examine the growth of downloadable content, it is necessary to examine the changes in chronological order. The offerings of downloadable content over the course of the *City Mayhem* franchise illustrate the integration of downloadable content into Tacit Games' business model. The downloadable content in the original *City*

Mayhem consists of various in-game clothing and appearance modification items. These downloads exist in three packs, and all three are free to download. *City Mayhem 2* was an even greater commercial success and also saw the development of more downloadable content. A clothing and appearance modification pack are available for free, but the developer also fields downloadable content at a cost. For 800 MSP ($10), players can download a pack with new vehicles, multiplayer maps, a new game mode, and more appearance customization options. The other downloadable content pack features the same type of content for 580 MSP ($7). In addition to in-game downloadable content as described above, other downloadable content is available by way of avatar items for XBOX Live users. These items, which consist primarily of clothing, range anywhere from 80-400 MSP ($1-$5). All of the avatar content references the game or characters in *City Mayhem 2.* Similarly, fans can also download themes and pictures for their XBOX 360 at costs ranging from 80-250 MSP ($1-$3.13). The increase in downloadable content offerings and game sales demonstrates an effort on the part of Tacit Games to create a space for players to show off their fan capital and encourages players to fill that space through their consumption. Downloadable content with a focus on customization creates a competitive atmosphere and an avenue for personalization on the part of the player. For *City Mayhem 3,* the developer expanded its downloadable content offerings substantially, which are outlined next.

Taking downloadable content to a new level, *City Mayhem 3* spawned 15 minor downloadable content packs on the XBOX 360, ranging from 160-240 MSP ($2-$3). The sheer number of packs and the act of pricing the content illustrates a buy-in on the part of Tacit Games for downloadable content and testifies to the success of the company in

cultivating consumer behavior. The developer attempts to frame this additional content as an extension of the core game, as opposed to an integral piece of the game. There exists a tension over this view, as consumers may interpret such downloadable content as the developer withholding content for additional profit. Respondents at Tacit Games deny this, but state that they do decide what content is considered part of the core game experience. The minor downloadable content packs for *City Mayhem 3* include many of the same types of items that were free in the prequel downloadable content packs, such as in-game appearance modifications and vehicles, but some also included new abilities. The developer could have continued to provide the content at no charge to the consumer, yet elected to force the consumer to pay for such content, deviating from the approach used in the prequel. The decision to alter this approach was deliberately made by the producer and framed by respondents as providing more choices, rather than charging consumers for content delivered free in the past. Developers have also invented other ways to create avenues for profit in video games, such structuring in-game content in a way that the player unlocks it over time.

In terms of other DLC, for 160 MSP ($2) players could download a DLC pack that enabled access to all in-game items that were typically unlocked as the game progressed. These items were gradually unlocked at no charge and included in the original game, but the downloadable content enabled players to pay to access content they had already paid for. This illustrates the power relations at play within the structure of a video game. As Tacit Games constructs and controls the environment, it decides in what way the consumers actually play the game. Developers provide the player with a choice, spend a significant amount of time with the game to unlock particular content, or

pay for immediate access. This by structuring the game in this manner, Tacit Games artificially creates value. Similarly, another downloadable content pack allows players to enable cheats in their games for 240 MSP ($3). This directly connects deification to a price tag. Quite literally, to be the best at the game, you have to pay for it. Neither of these DLC packs actually give the player new content, but simply unlock content already in the game. Since consumers must play the game for significant amounts of time to unlock certain items or become skilled players, the offering of a shortcut to new weapons or "God mode" now has value. However, the inclusion of the shortcut and God mode DLC is not new to video games. Many past video games included the ability to unlock all the weapons and a God mode after the player beat the game, but again in the case of the *City Mayhem* franchise, that which was once free has been monetized, without any apparent additional benefit to the consumer.

In addition to the 15 minor downloadable content packs, four major game expansions are available as downloadable content. These expansions range between 240-560 MSP ($3-$7) and include additional storyline and in-game content outside of the core title. The developer decides what content is included in the core game and what becomes downloadable content. To make the downloadable content model more attractive to players, consumers also have the option to purchase a "Season Pass," which includes the four major downloadable content expansions for 1,600 MSP ($20). If purchased separately, the four major downloadable content expansions would cost 1,920 MSP ($24). This results in a savings of four dollars in exchange for an extended commitment to the product. The season pass is designed to make the prospect of paying for additional content more enticing from the standpoint of the consumer. The season pass does not

include any of the minor downloadable content. Developers attempt to frame the season pass as beneficial for all the parties involved in the video game environment, including their bottom line and consumers. I examine the season pass in more detail later in this chapter, since it is designed to keep the consumer engaged with the game for a longer period of time.

There are only three free downloadable content packs for *City Mayhem 3*, but they are merely compatibility packs which to enable players with additional downloadable content to play with those who do not possess it.

City Mayhem 3 also saw the developer institute unique activation codes for multiplayer. Each new copy of *City Mayhem 3* ships with a one-time use "online pass" code that when entered enables the owner to play the game online. However, if the game is sold used, the new owner is unable to play online without a new, unique code. A code can be purchased on XBOX Live for 800 MSP ($10). This technically counts as a form of downloadable content, since a license is downloaded to the console. Respondents say the online pass was instituted to recoup profit lost when a consumer purchases a used copy of the game from a third party.

Over the course of this section, I have examined the downloadable content produced by Tacit Games for consumers, as well as the structure of this consumption environment. These examples of downloadable content pertain mostly to extending the experience for the consumer. Meanwhile, Tacit Games also attempts to create more value for consumers by bolstering its offerings of downloadable content that project fannish capital.

The proliferation of fannish DLC.

As noted in Chapter 1, fan capital is a significant aspect of the video game experience for players. Baudrillard (1998) states "happiness has to be *measurable*" (p. 49). By providing ways in which the consumer can demonstrate status, Tacit Games taps a huge monetary resource. Additionally, consumers may purchase such content to demonstrate their knowledge and love of the game (Jenkins, 2006). Many gamers evaluate competitors through an examination of such fannish content, which adds value. The amount of downloadable content made available to consumers by Tacit Games testifies to the importance placed on such content by the video game developer and the desire to create an environment where such downloadable content has value.

As in *City Mayhem 2,* players of *City Mayhem 3* are able to purchase XBOX 360 themes and pictures and items for their avatars. These range from 80-400 MSP ($1-$5) each. This downloadable content is highly visible and valuable among online players, since each player has an avatar to represent him or her to the rest of the gaming world. How these avatars appear tell other players many things, such as the player's favorite game or how big of a fan they are of a certain game, genre, or company. Associate producer #1 says this kind of downloadable content is "a way to show off. It's a prestige thing... People buy those because they're going to be playing against other people and they want to be like, "Check out what I bought!'" Tacit Games tries to frame such downloadable content as a way for players to express themselves, but it would be ludicrous to say the developer did not stand to benefit by additional public exposure and profits.

Creating a stable, cultivating environment: City Mayhem and Rogue Planet.

Gerbner's (1998) cultivation theory is rooted in the idea that continued exposure to messages results in changes to the viewer's reality. The longer time spent in the environment and the more consistent the messages, the greater the effect of cultivation. In an effort to illustrate the parallel evolution of Tacit Games downloadable content examination for other intellectual properties, *Rogue Planet* shows a trend similar to *City Mayhem.* This results in similar messages regarding consumption across games, which exposes the consumer to messages encoded by consumers more consistently. Theoretically, this should increase the cultivation effects of producer-encoded messages. It also illustrates a buy-in on the part of the producer to adopt this approach for encoding messages for consumers.

Tracking the Rogue Planet.

The third installment of the franchise and the first to offer downloadable content to consumers, *Rogue Planet: Revolution,* sold over a million copies and features three downloadable content packs, ranging between 320-400 MSP ($4-$5). These packs feature additional multiplayer maps or expansions to the storyline. Additionally, fans are also able to download items for their XBOX Live avatar for between 80-320 MSP ($1-$4). The game's sequel *Rogue Planet: Resistance* sold poorly. Respondents say the game was not expected to be a major success. As a result, only four downloadable content packs are available for the game, ranging between 80-560 MSP ($1-$7). These downloadable content packs feature additional weapons, maps, and modes for the game as well as expansions to the storyline.

From the brief look at the other major intellectual property created by Tacit Games, comparisons can be clearly drawn which indicate a uniform approach to downloadable content. While the offerings for *Rogue Planet: Resistance* were limited due to poor sales, it stands to reason that if the game was a greater success, Tacit Games would have followed up with additional downloadable content. Respondents confirmed this. As a result, I focused my efforts on understanding how Tacit Games attempts to cultivate consumers in regards to the *City Mayhem* franchise.

Summarizing the Tacit Games approach.

Throughout this examination of the base, I have outlined Tacit Games' product growth and examined changes to economic models and approaches to downloadable content. This is relevant to better understand the messages encoded by the video game producer. As an intellectual property, *City Mayhem* has been the most successful for the developer. As a result, most of the interview questions and responses revolve around this franchise. It should also be clear, however, that the developer as subject of this study is not alone in its use of downloadable content, as noted in Chapter 1. Many other developers have created similar content for their video games, with many producing even more. This makes it incredibly difficult for the consumer to play video games outside of this dominant structure. If the majority of video game producers elect to make downloadable content a commonplace industry structure, the consumer's agency is reduced, as he or she is given little alternative except to no longer play video games. It is this structure I examine next.

Preview of Major Themes

After following the process described in Chapter 3 for data collection and analysis, several major themes emerged from discussions with respondents. The structure of the video game industry, the nature of video games, the impact of technology on video games, consumer cultivation, and the cultivation of consumption were all found as determining factors in the design of messages encoded for consumers.

The Structure of the Video Game Industry

As noted earlier in this chapter, Williams (1980) emphasizes the base in cultural Marxism as a process, rather than a state. Similarly, the video game industry has not remained static. To best understand this process, interviews with those responsible for encoding messages are vital. This approach reveals information that may otherwise go unnoticed. For developers in the console industry, the dominant industry practices are a determining factor in what is produced and how. Through discussions with respondents, many topics within this theme came to light. These topics include the major economic models and political economy of the video game industry. These subthemes and respondent comments provide additional context to understand the video game producer's place in the industry economy and provide a platform from which to examine the changing nature of video games and the cultivation of the consumer in later sections.

The major economic models of the industry

Earlier in this chapter, I briefly examined the chief economic model employed by Tacit Games, the core title and downloadable content model. I will examine this model in more detail, after discussing the two other prevalent industry models: pay-to-play and free-to-play. All of these models have influenced and evolved from changes in the video

game industry as developers continue to push for the most profitable approach to video gaming. This effort functions as part of the capitalist system, striving for maximum efficiency. Those in the industry seek to establish which of the models is the most fortuitous, constantly tweaking approaches to structuring and selling video games. However, each of these models has specific benefits and weaknesses, which I examine next.

Pay-to-play as industry model

Pay-to-play generally allows limited playability for no cost, but offers additional tiers of service for a price or subscription. Respondents cited the popular game *World of Warcraft* as an example of a traditional pay-to-play model. To take part in *World of Warcraft,* players can play up to a certain level, but must then pay a subscription fee to progress beyond a point controlled by the game's developers. The player cannot complete the game without paying for it. Developers functioning within this model offer pieces of their game to consumers with the hope they will enjoy the product and invest in it monetarily. Unfortunately, if the consumer does not like the game, the developer does not profit. This puts additional pressure on the video game developer to create a compelling experience for players and cultivate them to continue consuming the product. In some cases, producers bolster this model's profitability through selling advertisements (within the game and related content). The pay-to-play approach is relatively conservative to the other major economic model in the video game industry, Free-to-play, which posses its own unique benefits and risks.

Free-to-play as industry model.

Unlike pay-to-play games, free-to-play games typically provide full playability of the game for free. To generate profit, developers offer in-game content, such as new weapons or vehicles that give an edge to consumers willing to pay. This content is typically inexpensive, but more commonplace. This approach not only offers the consumer the opportunity to personalize their experience, but also to be more competitive. Theoretically, this content can be generated infinitely, according to the senior programmer:

> They get you hooked with the free-to-play game and once you're hooked, they start selling you all this additional stuff. Part of that business model is that they'll start to put out more stuff as the time goes on.

Through this model, consumer cultivation is of supreme importance. Without continued consumption, the title cannot remain profitable for the developer. By offering new content consistently, developers continually shift the understanding of what it means to be a fan of a franchise or what it means to be competitive. This also shifts the process of the base in the sense of cultural Marxism. If consumers do not have the latest content, their fannish capital suffers and they are no longer true fans or at the top of their game (although, many gamers place little value on this fannish capital). Respondents say they specifically appeal to these dedicated fans. By designing the structure of the video game in this manner, developers create value by offering new content. The senior programmer likens the concept to that of a common household item, "It's not like it's the trash can they make the money off of. It's the fitted liners, because you will continue to buy those trash bags for the next ten years." Such a statement succinctly embodies the economic approach of free-to-play gaming. Free-to-play video game producers give away the game

for free, making profits from the sales of additional content (appearance modifications, special missions or weapons, additional experience points, etc.). Elements of both the pay-to-play and free-to-play models are present to some extent in the core game and downloadable content model, which I examine next.

Core title and downloadable content as industry model

As noted earlier, Tacit Games utilizes the core title and downloadable content model of video gaming, as does most of the console video game industry. In its most basic construction, developers create a core title. This experience can then be supplemented through various kinds of downloadable content (specific types of downloadable content are examined later in this chapter). Though popular, this model remains relatively misunderstood, according to respondents.

These producers attempt to frame the core title and downloadable content model as a matter of economic necessity. Associate producer #2 says, "In game development, if there's one product with a AAA title, you'd be going three or four years with absolutely zero income. That's horrifying for a business." By offering downloadable content, the video game producer is creating a new avenue for profit outside of the core title. This is drastically different from what many consumers would consider the traditional video game structure associated with the Atari 2600 or the Nintendo Entertainment System. The shift in attitude embracing downloadable content means the developer is able to generate profit outside of box sales over time. This is potentially problematic for the consumer, because it creates a space for potential exploitation through paying more than fair value. However, respondents also say downloadable content results in a more stable working situation for the employees of the developer. Associate producer #1 says:

> You will see it a lot in the industry that studios will staff up, finish a game, and then ramp down, which means employees get let go. We don't do that here, so one of the fringe benefits for us is that we to keep our employees.

In addition to retaining employees, the overall fiscal health of the developer has more potential to improve under this model. Respondents say this results in a better experience for employees, and in turn, the consumer. In an industry where developers are shuttered and publishers go bankrupt due to the high dependence on each game's success, respondents say this model gives them an edge. In testament to the volatility of the video game industry, Tacit Games' publisher was forced to file for bankruptcy over the course of this thesis, which delayed the interview process. However, because Tacit Games was itself financially stable, it was purchased by another publisher during bankruptcy proceedings. So, while it is clear that the core game and downloadable content model has many benefits for video game producers, exactly how consumers benefit remains questionable.

Nevertheless, Tacit Games attempts to frame the experience of continually spending money as positive for consumers. This reflects the function of the developer as the agent of the base in the cultural Marxist framework. Associate producer #1 claims the model results in a better gaming experience for consumers, "games still shipped with bugs. Now, because the company is still engaged with the title to release this downloadable content, they are actually providing better support than they used to." This support comes in form of fixing bugs and errors, as well as improving other aspects of the game, such as online connectivity. Other benefits cited by respondents include new ways to experience an intellectual property in which consumers are already invested. Downloadable content provides new content, and thus, a new experience for the

consumer. Having covered benefits for both producers and consumers, I now examine the profitability of downloadable content.

The profitability of downloadable content.

The actual profitability of downloadable content remains somewhat of a mystery. Respondents were not allowed to disclose figures for how much money is generated by downloadable content and the numbers are not publically released. Similarly, Tacit Games' parent publisher did not provide specific figures on downloadable content in its 2012 annual report, but did say the downloadable content offerings from *City Mayhem 3* helped grow digital revenues by over 60 percent. This information is controlled by corporate policies, but the rationale for the secrecy is unknown. Regardless, associate producer #1 reported Tacit Games was pleased with the success of the offerings of downloadable content for *City Mayhem 3*, "We can't talk about financials, but it's been successful. We're happy with and others are happy with it." Similarly, when asked about the profitability of downloadable content, specific to the *City Mayhem 3* release, the studio design manager reported:

> I don't know and I don't know if I could give out that information. I can tell you *City Mayhem 3* had the greatest revenue out of our publisher's titles and it was pretty high up there for XBOX 360 downloadable content sales for the year it came out.

Why the secrecy? Profitability is a bragging point for most businesses in capitalism – feature films make it a competition with box office records. It illustrates the health of the company to potential investors and establishes position in the industry hierarchy. The video game industry routinely reports sales figures for core titles, so why is this not done for downloadable content? The answer, I believe, lies in the profit margin. All

respondents reported a significant profit margin between the cost of downloadable content production and the return on investment. The studio design manager reported:

> It's much easier to make our money back and added profit on downloadable content because you're not building a lot of technology in association with it and the amount of people required to make that content is a lot less than it is on the main game.

Without sales figures, it is difficult to discern exactly how wide this profit margin is, but it can be inferred as profitable and worthwhile from respondent comments. The profitability of downloadable content is discussed with a sense of pride by associate producer #1:

> I won a bet, I'll put it that way. I was the producer for the *City Mayhem 3* downloadable content and I made a bet with the core game producer as to how profitable and how quickly profitable it would be and I won. I won by many months. We had put our bet for this amount before this date and we reached that amount like three or four months before that date.

Downloadable content is so profitable that respondents say it can also help offset losses if a game flops. As mentioned earlier, the video game industry is very competitive and there is a shrinking tolerance for unprofitable titles – this represents one of the pressures of the base on the developer. Those at Tacit Games know first-hand publishers can crumble if even one or two major games fail. Downloadable content can provide enough additional income to help even out the books. The studio design manager points out:

> Downloadable content can help offset failures, but it wouldn't be able to stop one. That's part of the nature of downloadable content. You're selling to the people who already bought the game. If not that many people bought the game, an even smaller number of people will buy the downloadable content. If we can get 20 percent of our player base to buy downloadable content, that would be a great success.

This quote illustrates that the profitability of downloadable content is limited by core game sales and also benchmarks a sales goal for downloadable content. It is this 20

percent that the developer is hopeful to cultivate in ideal consumers. These ideal consumers are those that continue to support the game and purchase additional content at the prescription of the developer.

Similarly, the senior programmer says "...the amount of money it costs us to make a downloadable content package versus the amount of money we make by selling it, there's a huge return on it." While no numbers are given, they are not required. It is likely that if this data was released to the public, it could reflect poorly on the Tacit Games and its publisher, placing them in an unfavorable light as the stereotypical money-hungry corporation that favors profit over customer satisfaction. In response to this, the studio design manager attempts to frame downloadable content differently and away from monetary figures, "To be fair, a consumer shouldn't necessarily have to know [the economics] to decide if they are getting value out of something." Certainly this is true to some extent, but a consumer does need to know the economics to determine if they are being swindled. Without appropriate data, the consumer stumbles around blindly attempting to discern if something if worth the price. However, cost may not be a concern for all consumers. Examining the quote, it reveals a great sense of superiority on the part of the developer, attempting to determine the bounds of what the consumer is entitled to feel. Additionally, it frames the developer as the party that decides what has value. In the case of Tacit Games, the publisher sets the price for downloadable content. This is one of many pressures during the process of video game production, which I examine next.

The political economy of video game production.

Outside economic pressures are not the only concern for video game developers – many come from within. Depending on the ownership situation, the political economy of

video game production can play a role in the development process of the game, including the offerings of downloadable content. Respondents at Tacit Games reported their parent publisher does influence certain aspects of the final product. These aspects include core game, downloadable content, and price.

Direct publisher influence on the core game.

Associate producer #2 reports the publisher has significant pull in what makes it into the final game in terms of content, "The money comes from the publisher. They have all the money and that is why, depending on how the publisher wants to be, they can get as much or as little say in the development process as they want." In theory, the publisher can alter the entire direction of the game, or potentially cancel it, if it is unlikely to succeed financially. Associate producer #2 also says that while this can occur, the Tacit Games' relationship with the publisher in the case of *City Mayhem 3* was functional. She says "If they had a certain need, we would be able to work it out and figure out what made the most sense and had the lowest impact on the studio and the project." For this case study, it appears the influence of the publisher on Tacit Games' core game content is relatively limited, impacting only a select few aspects, however the base itself has a profound impact.

Direct publisher influence on downloadable content.

Respondents report a good sense of trust on the part of the publisher to Tacit Games regarding game content, but say they encounter more pressure on the topic of downloadable content. Associate producer #1 outlines the working relationship for downloadable content between the developer and publisher during *City Mayhem 3*:

> We were obligated to provide certain types of assets for that purpose because marketing thought those they sounded good. Not the specifics, but

> they decided put this plus this plus this in a pack. And they wanted missions of course, because mission packs are the big ones they can center marketing efforts around because those lend themselves to trailers and announcement materials, screen shots, things like that. Other than that, they just said 'we want a lot of downloadable content.' They didn't give us numbers of packs they wanted or what they specifically wanted in the packs, so that really fell to us.

It is clear from this quote that the publisher has little interest in dictating the manner in which video games make money, so long as they are profitable (at least in this example). The concern is with the bottom line, not the consumer. Associate producer #1 points out that there was only one specific piece of downloadable content dictated by the publisher during the development of *City Mayhem 3*, "The only other thing they pushed on was the penthouse pack. Because they were like, it's the penthouse in *City Mayhem 3*." Associate producer #1 states the pack was driven entirely by marketing, and hinted at a sort of sexual appeal, likely in reference to the popular *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines. Considering this is the only pack with content directly requested by the publisher, it indicates the publisher views its customer base as male and obsessed with sex. If this is the case, it constitutes a generalization on the part of the publisher, and derogatory one at that. Another manner in which publishers influence content is the release schedule for downloadable content. Recalling cultivation theory's emphasis on exposure to messages over time, this schedule is an important factor in cultivating the realities of the consumer.

Publisher influence on the game's release schedule.

Respondents reported the frequency of downloadable content was influenced by the publisher. The studio design manager explained the give and take nature of the developer's relationship with the publisher on the topic, recalling "They would come to us and say we need your [downloadable] content packs here and we have to work with

them. So, like, 'we can't do 30 days, but we can do 45.'" The emphasis from the publisher on the release increments references the strong desire to produce a steady stream of content to keep consumers consistently engaged. Respondents say many of these requirements instituted by the publisher are derived from data supplied by major players in the industry, such as Microsoft and Sony. This helps illustrate the power relations of the industry.

According to the studio design manager:

> They told us when you release a game and hit a 30, 60, and 90 day release schedule for [downloadable content], you're going to maximize your profits, because that's about as long as they see people playing a game in general… So when we plan downloadable content schedules, that's what we try and hit.

The reasoning for spacing out downloadable content releases is strategic. Developers seek to maintain consumer interest in the video game for as long as possible. If cultivation theory is applied, it holds the longer the player is engaged with the title, the more likely they will be to consume additional content and the more likely they will perceive this structure as natural. By releasing downloadable content every 30 days, developers create a way to keep their game fresh in the minds of consumers and against a backdrop of new, competing titles. Such a schedule also creates expectations among consumers. Respondents say most players no longer invest significant amounts of time in a game 90 days after release. This is another reason for the development of the season pass, which allows video game producers to book revenue immediately, regardless to if consumers actually play the new content. Communicating to the consumer that new content is available is also a challenge for developers.

The publisher and the in-game store.

To cultivate the ways in which players consume, the developer has to find a way to facilitate its goal of making consumption continuous. Tacit Games instituted an in-store game for *City Mayhem 3* at the behest of its parent publisher and major industry players like Microsoft. This in-game store makes it easier and more convenient for consumers to access downloadable content. Prior to an in-game store, players had to exit the game and look for the content in the marketplace. With this new addition, players can purchase new downloadable content in the game without leaving the game environment. This makes purchasing and deciding to purchase the content much easier for the player. Before the in-game store, players left the environment of the video game, resulting in more opportunity to consider purchasing the downloadable content.

However, *City Mayhem 3* was not built to accommodate the in-game store and the developers initially resisted, but eventually worked it into the game. The inclusion of the in-game store was reportedly a tipping point for the developers on understanding the importance and profitability of downloadable content. Associate producer #1 says:

> We realized that if we have that we have to put value there, which means we have to make a lot of content. The plan just started ballooning out, really. We were realizing ways to do it that were low impact to the team and to the budget.

This quote reflects the realization of the developer that while they have created an efficient channel to cultivate consumers, they must now utilize that channel in the most effective manner. This also indicates a buy-in on the part of the developer to the core title and downloadable content model. Because of the resounding success and technical groundwork laid by the in-game store, respondents indicated downloadable content would continue to play a large role in the future releases from the company. This also

illustrates how a developer Tacit Games can influence both the base and superstructure to create cultivation, since respondents say Microsoft actually recognized the developer for setting the industry standard in the approach to downloadable content. Now that I have examined the ways in which publishers influence Tacit Games' content and releases (and vice-versa), I question how the cost of the core game and downloadable content are decided.

Setting the price for the core title and downloadable content.

In the case of Tacit Games, respondents say the publisher sets the selling point for both the main game and the downloadable content, but what factors influence this decision? The standard price of a game is set by major industry players. Standard prices for video game titles under the core game and downloadable content model ranges from $40 to $60, depending on the game's budget. Most major releases, including Tacit Games' *City Mayhem 3*, retail for $60. Unlike core titles, the price of downloadable content can vary widely from game to game, depending on a variety of factors. The studio design manager for Tacit Games describes the pricing process for *City Mayhem 3* downloadable content as a mixture of industry, publisher, and developer pressures:

> Our publisher would look at what's out on the marketplace and the amount of content, then ask us for feedback… We would say, well we think this is worth five dollars or ten dollars, but we don't have control over it.

This quote describes the subordinate relationship that exists between the publisher and Tacit Games. On the topic of downloadable content sales, it appears the developer has little control in the matter. Interestingly absent from the quote is the consumer's opinion on how much the content should cost. This indicates the consumer has little say in this situation. The senior programmer says consumers vote with their wallets, "They will

speak with their money. They will either decide to boycott us for our practices, or they will buy the downloadable content… the numbers show the vast majority buy it…" Developers collect information from consumers about their wants, but do not ask about the fairness of pricing. They do however attempt to cultivate a positive experience for the consumer. "You shouldn't feel like you were cheated to get that downloadable content" says the studio design manager. One of the ways Tacit Games seeks to cultivate positive impressions about downloadable content is through a "season pass."

Incidentally the season pass is another way in which the publisher influenced Tacit Games during the production of *City Mayhem 3.* A season pass allows the consumer to pre-purchase all or most of the downloadable content that will be released for the game, before it is released. This practice is becoming more and more common in the video game industry, as illustrated by the titles examined in this thesis. Respondents at Tacit Games attempt to frame the season pass as positive for consumers. The senior programmed likens it to a promise, "It's a way to guarantee you can get content as it releases." Additionally, consumers are rewarded with a small discount as opposed to buying all the downloadable content separately for the normal price. However, the season pass does not only benefit the consumer – it's particularly profitable for the developer. The senior programmer says "It's better than a preorder. If someone spends $20 on your season pass, you're booking that revenue immediately, instead of having to wait to forecast revenue for packs as they are released." Whether or not the consumer actually plays the new content is irrelevant since he or she has already paid for the content up front. Indeed, players may purchase a season pass when a game is released, yet never

play any of the new content because they become invested in another game. This is of little concern to the developer, since they book revenue immediately.

Respondents report they were not enthusiastic about the idea of a season pass for *City Mayhem 3,* but were compelled to create one by the publisher. Associate producer #1 says:

> We didn't plan on the season pass. Marketing came to us and said 'Do a season pass.' We said 'It is literally impossible.' And they said 'Make it possible.' And we have very talented programmers who figured out how to game the backend systems of these consoles and make it possible to do the season pass. It panned out really big for us and in retrospect we were like, 'Well marketing got it right.'

Associate producer #1's word choice in this quote is important to recognize as it illustrates the pressure and control the publisher has over Tacit Games. Additionally, associate producer #1 refers to marketing's push as the "right" decision because it was profitable. Respondents say without the push from the developer, the season pass would likely not have happened.

From the discussion in this section, it is clear there are many factors influencing the structure of the video game industry. These pressures include the major economic models of the industry and the political economy of video game production. Specifically, the different types of economic models place pressures and limitations on the developer, shaping the manner in which consumers interact with producers. The political economy of video game production examines pressures and limitations on the developer from within the industry. These conditions of production impact the product produced by the developer as well as the messages encoded for the consumer. Another theme that emerged from data collected in this case study as an influencing factor in message encoding is the nature of video games themselves, which I examine next.

The Nature of Video Games

One of the major themes that emerged from interviews with respondents pertains to the nature of video games. This includes the nature of video games a core title, the nature of downloadable content, and the nature of technology in video games. Each of these aspects influences the process of the base, and each is constantly changing.

The changing nature of video games.

Respondents speak of a constant change in terms of what could be considered a video game. These changes impact the messages created and encoded by producers. When asked to identify if the definition of a video game is shifting, associate producer #1 struggles to frame exactly what a video game is:

> I don't think that has ever settled. At least not yet… I think maybe in ten to fifteen years maybe we'll really know what a video game is at a generic level, but I don't think we know quite yet. And I think that's just because video games are so, maybe it will never settle because video games are so dependent on technology.

This quote reflects the constant changes in the base of capitalism and the logic of capital. For example, respondents describe their experiences developing *City Mayhem 1* as a night and day difference from *City Mayhem 3.* For example, respondents reported the development of downloadable content in *City Mayhem 1* as relatively last-minute, while planning for downloadable content occurred long before the release of *City Mayhem 3.* This is a result of the changing conditions of technology that impact the base and superstructure.

Associate producer #1 also reveals history and culture poses a problem in negotiating what exactly a video game is with the consumer:

> I think the problem is gaming got really big at a couple different times and people are defining it by what it was like when it got big. That's what they

> were used to. It got big during the Atari age, but then it faded away. Then it got big around the time of the PS2 and the beginning of this generation and its increasing still. So, there are a lot of gamers who identify a video game as what it was when they started playing them.

Tacit Games attempts to frame the experience of video gaming in a certain way, while the consumer may have a different opinion. However, according to Tacit Games, only the encoder can know what a video game *really is*. The perception of the consumer is secondary. This description illustrates the volatility of the industry and indicates a collective definition of a video game as a shared meaning negotiated within a culture. One of the major concepts introduced by respondents as spearheading the conceptualization of a video game is the notion of "gamification," which I examine next.

Gamification as the video game.

"Gamification" refers to the gaming appropriation of everyday tasks and activities into a format designed for entertainment, a term coined by Nick Pelling (Marczewski, 2012). Respondents link this concept heavily to the progression of technology. Associate producer #1 is hesitant to commit to a definition of a video game, "I think it would be disingenuous to say what a video game is because, what is the gamification of the current technology?" While somewhat limited on consoles, both associate producer #1 and the senior programmer discuss at length the explosion of the smartphone market and the gamification opportunities afforded to developers through this new technology. Respondents suggest this gamification has begun to shift into the console market. The senior programmer notes "video games basically just expand to whatever the current technology is… I think it's safe to say video games will expand to whatever the popular device is of the day." This quote again suggests a connection between the definition of a video game and the current state of technology. Such changes mean new opportunities for

developers on message encoding. Associate producer #2 also discussed the concept of gamification, "It's bringing gaming into life where there normally was monotony or a boring task you had to do in your life. The concept of gamification is to make that more interesting." She specifically cited the applications for mobile phones as gaming devices, given their availability and integration with the Internet. Unlike smartphones and mobile gaming, consoles like the XBOX 360, provide a more stable gaming platform for developers. Still, gamification of the console has changed over time. The studio design manager says "Neither Tacit Games or Microsoft knew all the capabilities the [XBOX 360] would have or ended up with." This suggests industry players anticipated the console itself would change to become more profitable. Gamification could be considered the ultimate embodiment of capitalism, since it constantly expands and seeks new avenues for monetization and cultivation.

Having examined some factors that shape the conceptualization of a video game, it is equally important to interrogate Tacit Games' understanding of downloadable content.

The changing nature of downloadable content.

Under the core title and downloadable content model in use by Tacit Games, downloadable content is dependent upon the core title. This means changes to the conception of video games also impact the conceptualization of downloadable content. Tacit Games attempts to frame downloadable content in a manner appealing to the consumer.

Framing downloadable content for the consumer.

Respondents note the development process for the main game is separate from the downloadable content production process, but that the industry does a poor job explaining the process behind making downloadable content for a game. The studio design manager explains the process of deciding what was included on the disc with the core game and what becomes downloadable content:

> With the *City Mayhem* games specifically, we don't try to hold back content. We actually say, "Okay, this is the game as we envision it, this is the full experience. If you do this and play all this, you should feel like you got your money's worth out of it."

While the studio design manager's concern for the consumer's perception is admirable, whether or not the developer holds back content is questionable. The studio design manager frames the core game as the full experience. This illustrates the control of the developer over the structure and design of the product. As noted earlier, Tacit Games initially planned to have a team developing downloadable content during production of the core game, but the group was eventually cannibalized to work on other projects. Consumers may question why downloadable content is not included with the price of the core title if it is being developed simultaneously. Associate producer #2 explains a typical scenario at Tacit Games, "The project teams for the company that actually work on games go in a cycle. There's a conceptual phase, a preproduction phase, a production phase, a postproduction phase, and a submission phase. Most companies will have these phases." Associate producer #2's definition of a development cycle is relevant because all development content (the core game and any downloadable content) at the developer in question follows the same procedure. Respondents say at Tacit Games, downloadable content development occurs one a separate cycle from the main game. This means the

core title and downloadable content are typically at different development phases. Respondents say ideally, there is always something in development, whether it is a core title or downloadable content. Development of content is continuous because consumption of content is continuous. This produces a consistent environment to cultivate consumers.

The studio design manager notes the importance of public perception and consumer satisfaction as a determining factor for deciding what or how much content becomes downloadable content and what is included in the core title. Again, respondents say framing of downloadable content as something additional outside of the core title is important. This decision is aimed at creating and widening the perceptible gap for the consumer between the core title and downloadable content. For example, the studio design manager specifically frames downloadable content as its own unique product:

> Everything else we add on is just a way of exploring or giving you a little bit more. If you like customization items, here are a few more, if you like certain aspects of the story, here's another small story we have that doesn't make a big difference in the main game. You shouldn't feel cheated to get that downloadable content.

Whether or not the additional content makes a difference in the core game is not determined by Tacit Games. Certainly, downloadable content may have been conceptualized as something extra on the part of the developer, but it is the player who decides the impact of downloadable content. This includes its impact on aspects of the core game, such as the storyline. Regardless, developers attempt to frame downloadable content in a manner that is not threatening to the consumer's perceptions of value. For example, associate producer #1 says "There are things we do… like bundle things together and provide a discount." This appeals to the consumer's sense of value. The

developer is also quick to point out the amount of work invested in the downloadable content. Associate producer #2 says, "It's extra team. It's extra time. It's extra money." Developers like Tacit Games use this approach to frame downloadable content as worth purchasing, even though profits from the sales are significant.

Further framing downloadable content as a sort of add-on, the senior programmer says "downloadable content will extend the lifetime of your game, but not indefinitely." This suggests the goal of downloadable content is to generate and hold consumer attention for as long as possible and offer more profit opportunities for the developer. Consumers should at least have some form of awareness of this activity. Interestingly, it also creates a conflict between producer messages. The developer finds itself attempting to frame downloadable content to consumers as just "a little bit more" to avoid offending the consumer that such content was not incorporated into the core title, but at the same time trying to frame the downloadable content as something worth purchasing. This relationship is complicated by the different types of downloadable content created by developers for consumers, which I now briefly examine.

Types of downloadable content.

There exist several common types of downloadable content specific to consoles, including the XBOX 360. Durables (e.g. mission packs, significant expansions to the story line, etc.), microtransactions (e.g. appearance customizations, personalization content), and consumables (e.g. double experience, single-use items). It is important to examine these differences to explore the various ways in which downloadable content has been adapted in a manner to contribute to the cultivation of how players consume.

Durables are content which the user purchases and then owns (even through actual ownership is illusory), similar to a core game. Associate producer #1 says "This is the only type [Tacit Games] practices as a developer. That's the type most closely associated with core games at this time." The respondents suggest examples of durable downloadable content in *City Mayhem 3* included mission packs and appearance customization packs. Mission packs could include several missions and other new content while appearance customization packs could include several weapon or character appearance customizations (often called "skins"). Durable downloads are framed by developers according to their size and significance. Illustrating the control of the developer over the video game environment, the determination of what is or isn't durable downloadable content is made the developer.

Another similar type of downloadable content is the microtransaction. These downloads are similar to durables, but smaller in scope. Associate producer #1 says:

> They can cost like, a dollar and they are the kinds of things people purchase for the prestige of doing so. If you see a weapon skin or different player skin, people buy those to customize their own experience. They have a lot more choice whether to engage with those or not. They don't really affect the game that much.

This quote again illustrates the conflict between providing substantial new content and framing the downloadable content as valuable to the consumer. Associate producer #1 frames microtransactions as a customization of the player's experience. However, it is the consumer that decides how much downloadable content affects their experience with the game, yet associate producer still attempts to frame the effect of such downloadable content on the game as minimal. Additionally, purchasing downloadable content is presented as a "choice," but to the invested fan it is hardly a choice. While the developer

frames the core title as "the full experience," for dedicated fans, this experience is complete when they have played all available content, including downloadable content. Finally, the last type of downloadable content examined here is the consumable.

Consumable downloadable content is explained by associate producer #1 as something that decrements over time, "for example, for the next hour you'll get triple experience or something like that." Other examples may include packs of content that randomly unlock a certain character or ability, such as the description of *Mass Effect*'s multiplayer packs in Chapter 1. This kind of downloadable content varies wildly across different games. One of the major benefits of the consumable downloadable content model, is that it has potentially limitless profit potential. Many items unlocked by consumable downloadable content get used up or expire and must be purchased again. It is the capitalist economic system reproduced digitally in a video game. Supply and demand is recreated in an artificial environment, as are many of the critiques against capitalism, such as manipulation and exploitation. One of the major aspects of a consumer economy is the idea of choice, which has been mentioned multiple times by respondents. Downloadable content represents choice in this digital economy.

Downloadable content as choice.

Respondent comments about the types of downloadable content are valuable because they illustrate the fragmented nature of video game content. Developers like Tacit Games have many options for ways in which they can organize downloadable content, which in turn provides more choices for the consumer. These choices are both material and ideological.

Respondents at Tacit Games say downloadable content provides material choices for consumers by allowing them to personalize their game experience. The studio design manager says "We try to give the player tools to make their character and experience unique to them." Developers create content based on perceived consumer wants. Similarly, developers can modify downloadable content packs to encourage consumers to invest in them. Associate producer #1 notes the nature of downloadable content continues to change with every title release and developers like Tacit Games continue to look for new and more effective ways of selling such content to consumers:

> Maybe we can separate downloadable content into smaller bundles? Instead of like, three costumes together, maybe people can buy a single one, and maybe we can figure out how a player is engaging with the game and use systems to auto-bundle downloadable content together...

All respondents emphasize the need to constantly modify the approach to downloadable content to maximize profits and generate consumer interest. This constant change is designed to suggest improvement and evolution to the consumer. A producer for Tacit Games says "Downloadable content is an opportunity. It gets bigger and bigger each time with the next generation and new projects as we get more experience." Over the course of the *City Mayhem* franchise, Tacit Games has modified its approach to downloadable content over time to become more profitable, according to the senior programmer:

> We were admittedly were a little slow on the uptake, especially in *City Mayhem 1* and to some degree in *City Mayhem 2.* We didn't prepare very well to deliver downloadable content post launch. Certainly not in *City Mayhem 1*. We hacked that in. It was terrible. We were not prepared at all to do it, but we were convinced it was worth our time. There's a good benefit to cost ratio here to actually deliver it, but we were not prepared for it at all. We prepared for it a tiny bit on *City Mayhem 2*, but it was still kinda hacked in. *City Mayhem 3* was the first one we from the get go said, "We need to plan for this."

Planning for downloadable content is necessary to cultivate consumption, just as noted in the discussion on the strategic release of downloadable content. Without a plan to meet the 30, 60, 90 day window discussed earlier, producers jeopardize the consistent messages required for cultivation. Respondents also indicated Tacit Games is continuing to examine more ways in which to offer the consumer choices with how he or she constructs his or her game experience. The studio design manager says other economic models such as free-to-play or pay-to-play can offer more choices than the core title and downloadable content model:

> One of the big problems in the industry is to pay $60 for something you don't know if you'll like in the long term. It's hard for people. I get that. I wouldn't say, "Suck it up, you have to live with it." …Ultimately people are afraid or they don't think $60 is a fair price. So what we need to do is make it easier for people to pay the amount they want to pay for at least part of the experience they want to play.

Everything is for sale. By breaking up content into small chunks, the producer is cultivating the consumer to purchase in a similar manner. Smaller chunks are easier for the consumer to swallow, as most people would rather spend $5 or $10 at a time, as opposed to dropping a full $60 on a game. It is also makes it easier for consumer to forget exactly how much money he or she has spent on said chunks (if the total is known, it make shock the consumer into spending more responsibly). Similarly, by making content more personalized to consumer wants, respondents are hopeful to keep consumers engaged with their product for a longer period of time. In line with cultivation theory, the longer the consumer spends in the environment, the more prone they become to viewing reality in line with the messages they receive.

Having examined downloadable content and its changes over time, it is clear that video game technology has also transformed. These shifts impact the messages encoded

by producers and the ways in which producers can influence their consumers. I examine technology in detail next.

The Impact of Technology on Video Games

During interviews with respondents, it became clear from discussion that many of the changes discussed in the previous sections of this chapter were a direct result of changes to technology. Technology is a major part of the environment used by producers to encode and carry messages to consumers. Improvements to this technology present producers with new avenues to cultivate consumer reality. Additionally, producers frame changes to technology as a positive evolution – something better designed to serve consumers. However, this is also profitable. Two aspects of technology, consoles and delivery systems, were cited by respondents Tacit Games as influential factors.

Changes to consoles and the implications for producers

Early consoles lacked an Internet connection, which significantly limited the amount of control that producers had on consumers. For example, after the producer encoded a message for the consumer, there was no way to alter that message after it was in the hands of the consumer. If the consumer didn't like the game or it no longer appealed to the consumer, the game gathered dust on the shelf. Similarly, the only way producers could directly communicate with consumers was through the game itself, or traditional media like television. Producers could only turn to sales numbers and interviews with players to look for ways to improve products. Additionally, producers were limited to the kinds of hardware excessories discussed in earlier in this thesis (the Zapper light run, R.O.B. the robot, etc.). The integration of the internet led to significant changes in the structure of consoles.

The studio design manager reported a very nebulous start for systems like the XBOX 360, "We didn't know all the capabilities the console would have, or ended up with. It's a very different platform now than it was then." Over the course of the life of the console, producers became more adept at reaching into the living rooms of consumers, poking and prodding them in profitable directions. This includes changes to the home screen when the consumer turns on the console, as well as the integration of downloadable content.

Changes to the home screen and other areas of the console system now allow for producers to place advertisements before the consumer, without the consumer even having to play the game. If the developer has new content available for a game the consumer could be interested in, they can alert the consumer via the home screen, or other screens, out-of, or within the game. In this manner, producers encode messages for the consumer by advertising the latest content.

As the Internet-centric consoles like the XBOX 360 began to find new ways to reach consumers, the integration of downloadable content resulted in changes to the relationship between the developer and consumer. The technology existed first, out of which the consumption culture grew. The creation of this culture was not without growing pains. The studio design manager says developers approached the XBOX 360 and its abilities with trepidation at first, "downloadable content was more of an afterthought [in the beginning]. If you were thinking about anything, it was like, 'oh… we can add more to this game.' We hadn't even contemplated that on a console before." Suddenly, developers were faced with the ability to expand the game to outside the box, without consumers having to go to the store to buy an expansion pack – it could be

downloaded directly to the console via the Internet. However, while the console was technically able to accomplish this, developers reportedly had a tough time catching up. Developers had to learn how to harness this ability to maximize profits. The studio design manager explained that while it was technologically possible from the console side to add content, games were not programmed in a manner that allowed for easy expansion:

> All we did for *City Mayhem 1* was add in some multiplayer levels. That was all we could afford to do and all that our game was capable of doing. We couldn't add new missions and other content because our game wasn't built to be expanded on like that.

The studio design manager explained the issue from a technical standpoint. He says "The structure of the game is made in a way that we're already maximizing the amount of resources available to us," referring to technical aspects of the console, such as memory. In short, the developers did not create the *City Mayhem 1* with the extension of the experience in mind.

Without downloadable content, games were created as "one-shot" experiences. The player could play the same experience multiple times, but all that existed for that particular game was in the box. Players would need to wait for the game's sequel, which could be years down the road. As developers became more familiar with the new options afforded to them by consoles like the XBOX 360, programming evolved to support the idea of downloadable content. Producer messages were encoded to a more nuanced goal. Instead of simply attempting to cultivate consumption, producers now encode their messages to cultivate consumers to consume in specific ways. To this end, developers utilize the console to draw out the core game experience and keep the consumer engaged with their product longer. The studio design manager explains, "With *City Mayhem 2*, we had a more concerted effort to give more variety of content. We had multiplayer stuff, put

in new missions. We also allowed players to download new clothing items, customization items, and vehicles." Consumers were given more choices and an extension to the experience, which are framed as a progress. In the quote, the studio design manager again constructs the developer as the controlling party, by noting how Tacit Games "allowed" players to download new content. This trend of content expansion continued, according to the senior programmer, who explained the planned extension of *City Mayhem 3* in detail:

> For *City Mayhem 3,* we had more of a formal framework in place, so when it came time to actually create the downloadable content, there was already a process, a pipeline in place so that it wasn't as hard to get into the game.

This quote illustrates how the developer has adapted the new technology to make their business more profitable and invested in the core title and downloadable content model. Annual reports from Tacit Games' parent publisher also indicate a commitment to significant amounts of downloadable content. Tacit Games streamlined the coding for the game to accommodate downloadable content more easily. This leads to less time and money spent developing downloadable content, making it more profitable. Associate producer #2 explains how this is accomplished:

> When we do finally release a product, it's helpful to build off of what we originally released. So with downloadable content, instead of waiting three years for your next product, you're able to build off of the foundation you've already released.

By taking this approach, the developer is able to avoid building an entirely new game, choosing instead to utilize the existing technology created for the core game as a basis for new content. This allows for greater ease of content creation since many of the assets, such as character models, sounds, textures, etc. already exist and are thus reused in the

downloadable content. This quote also conflicts with the messages consumers receive when it comes to the full experience. Here, the core title is viewed only as the "foundation," it is the downloadable content that completes the home. Similarly, this quote can also apply to the consumer's investment with the game. Respondents say downloadable content is targeted at the game's most invested players, estimated to be 20 percent of the player base. It is easier for the developer to maintain customers, than it is to create new ones.

Interestingly, respondents continue to frame the shifts in console technology as evolutionary and beneficial for the developer. Little time is spent on illustrating how such changes benefit the consumer. Making the development of downloadable content easier benefits the developer the most. It presents the developer with a way to produce new content for consumers, which brings in additional profit. Additionally, it expands the amount of time the consumer spends within the game environment. The only benefit this has for the consumer is framed as "choice" by respondents and is constructed as something positive. A major part of the reason downloadable content has become increasingly popular is due to the expansion of high speed internet service and the ability to deliver such content directly to the consumer without them leaving the couch. This also has implications for messages encoded by developers like Tacit Games.

Digital delivery

Another one of the influencing factors in the explosion of downloadable content in video games is the improvements to Internet infrastructure. Even in the last generation of consoles, such as Sony's PS2 and the original XBOX from Microsoft, direct-to-console content delivery was almost non-existent. With the shrinking of the "digital

divide" and the increasing accessibility of high-speed Internet connections, the profit potential of downloadable content is expanding.

Respondents say without an almost instant-gratification, the appeal to consumers for downloadable content is lessened. This paints another negative perception of the player as someone with a short attention span and incapable of making complex decisions. The senior programmer noted how "none of this stuff would have been possible 10-15 years ago, just because broadband was still kind of… not everybody had it… waiting an hour to download two megabytes of something, it's ludicrous." Consumers want to play content immediately, according to respondents and simply cannot handle a two-hour wait. The shrinking tolerance for long wait times is likely related to the growing number of gamers with high-speed internet. Broadband.gov (n.d.) states nearly 200 million Americans have broadband at home and cites country-wide access to high-speed internet as a long term goal for the National Broadband Plan. This provides a clear direction for video game producers, signaling that digital delivery will only improve in the future. Even minor waits are lamented by the producers as detrimental to profits. The senior programmer continues:

> Nobody is going to want to by an outfit or skin for their character if they have to wait for them to send a CD in the mail… but if I can get a new outfit in the span of 5-10 seconds, sure. I'll buy a dozen of those.

As noted in Chapter 1, expansions or sequels to video games are not uncommon, however, these are traditionally significantly-sized additions. Respondents indicate a link between the size of downloadable content and the amount of time a consumer is willing to wait to attain it. This suggests gaming culture has been cultivated as fast-paced and based on impulse purchasing. So much so, that some respondents say digital delivery will

eventually replace brick and mortar stores. This shift will push consumers to reside within the framework constructed by the producer for an even longer period of time. Instead of spending time at the big box store, the consumer will simply have to turn on their console. Again, the actual console environment is littered with messages from producers to consumers about the latest downloadable content "choices" or how to expand his or her experience to get the most out of the game. Even with the shift to total online delivery expected by some respondents, the producer for *City Mayhem 3* says "I don't think the whole $60 box product is going away, that will still be there." This implies that while this "bookend" type of game will still exist, the delivery system through which the player consumes the game will change, dependent on technology. How the consumer consumes will still be controlled by the producer. In particular, consumption is expanded for the lazy and impatient consumer cultivated by the producer.

Technology changes the way in which producers encode messages for consumers. It also shifts the content of these messages in response to the new abilities afford by such technology. Culture grows from the frameworks provided by new technology. Digital delivery also enables producers to encode messages for the consumer designed to create a customer base with an affinity for instant gratification, which the developer can feed.

Consumer Cultivation and Producer Encoding

Up to this point, this chapter has examined a wide variety of aspects that influence the production of video games, and specifically the *City Mayhem* franchise. I have illustrated how the structure of the video game industry has shifted to embrace an economic model of video games that expands the experience outside of the core title and examined the pressures of political economy within Tacit Games. Additionally, I have

examined shifts in how Tacit Games has framed video games and downloadable content, as well as investigating how technology impacts the relationship between the producer and consumer. All of these themes lead back to cultivation theory and the examination of the way producers encode their messages for consumers. Throughout this chapter, I have examined each theme, looking for evidence of cultivation theory, this section is where I examine specifically how producers at Tacit Games encode their messages for consumers to cultivate consumer behavior.

For this thesis, cultural Marxism and cultivation theory are used as major lenses to critique messages created by producers. Cultural Marxism involves the examination of the relationship that exists between the production, reception, and interpretation of cultural artifacts through historical contexts. It specifically looks at the negotiation of culture between the producer and consumer. The producer seeks to create a culture that promotes specific social intentions favored by the producer. Cultivation theory works hand-in-hand by examining the impact of the dominant messages encoded by producer on the consumer. To explore these messages, I examine the way those interviewed construct the developer's interactions with consumers, but first I will refresh cultivation theory.

Creating the consumption environment.

George Gerbner (1998) began his scholarly milestones essay in *Mass Communication & Society* with the following quote, which seems wholly appropriate to situate this analysis of cultivation in this thesis project:

> If future historians wanted to know about the common cultural environment of stories and images into which a child was born in the second half of the 20th century, where would they turn? How would they describe its action structure, thematic content, and representation of people? How would they trace the ebb and flow of its currents? (p. 175).

While we have now progressed into the 21st century, Gerbner's concerns remain valid. During Gerbner's early studies, the focus of research was on the cultivative effects of television; Video games were nothing more than cheap entertainment at the arcade down the block. This is no longer the case. Video games now represent a major cultural force, as noted in Chapters 1 and 2. The audience for video games has grown astronomically and producer messages have increased in parallel. Up until this point, I have only mentioned this shifting audience. I now undertake a detailed examination of the ebb and flow of cultivation currents.

In a world of consistently-changing technology, identifying consumer messages can be difficult. Cultivation theory traditionally examined "recurrent images in network television content… the portrayal of violence, gender roles, race and ethnicity, occupations, and many other topics and aspects of life, over long periods of time" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). In many ways, video game producers communicate to players what to consume, how to consume, and why to consume, among other things (although consumers do have avenues of agency). Whether or not this actually impacts the player's reality is not the focus of this thesis. Recall that the first prong of cultivation theory, institutional analysis, "is designed to investigate the formation of polices directing the massive flow of media messages" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 179). This specifically targets what messages are encoded by producers. Messages are symbolic interactions and can be overt or covert, as well as intentional or unintentional. The "mass-produced symbolic environment creates publics and reveals social and institutional dynamics; because it expresses social and cultural patterns, it also cultivates them" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). This environment "reflects the structure and functions of the institutions

that transmit them" (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69). It is this environment I examine throughout the interviewing process. Consumers enter this environment every time they turn on their console or play a game. They become immersed in this environment. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) remind cultivation theory contends "those who spend more time watching television are the most likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages in the world of fictionalized television" (p. 337). I contend this can be applied to video games, specifically the ways in which producers cultivate players to consume by encoding messages and creating an environment favorable to their ends.

Encoding the consumption environment for the "ideal consumer."

One of the major ways in which video game developers encode messages for consumers is by controlling the actual environment for consumption. Gerbner (1998) notes communities are best cultivated when they are regularly exposed to an overall pattern of programming for long periods of time. As noted earlier in this chapter, players of video games, and consoles in particular, cannot play video games outside of this environment. Developers like Tacit Games attempt to control the way in which consumers understand video games through messages encoded to create an ideal consumer. As noted earlier in Chapter 2, consumers can adapt a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading to the messages (Hall, 1980).

The ideal consumer as framed by the developer would see the core title and downloadable content model as the best model for all of those involved in the exchange. However, respondents say many gamers vocally complain this model is unfair to consumers, apparently rejecting the dominant reading prescribed by producers.

Respondents frame this dissent as a misplaced sense of entitlement. The senior programmer points out video game players are "so used to getting everything at once. They feel like 'oh, I'm only getting part of the game and I have to pay for the rest.'" Developers attempt to frame the experience differently. The ideal consumer would see the core title and downloadable content model as "actually really providing a service and you can pay for the service as you see fit," according to the studio design manager. Ideal consumers would buy-in to the service model, extending their time with the game indefinitely. This is desire is reflected by respondents at Tacit Games during the development of *City Mayhem 3.* Associate producer #1 emphasizes the desire to keep the consumer engaged with the game for as long as possible:

> What we wanted to do was have a steady trickle of DLC to keep people engaged with the title, before mission packs, in-between mission packs, and then after mission packs, leading all the way up to the time which we could release the full-package, game of the year version with everything on it.

This "trickle" of content is designed to get the ideal consumer to invest both monetarily and emotionally in the product. Respondents also expressed the desire to keep the consumer engaged from game to game. While Tacit Games does not release a game every year, other companies, such as publisher Activision, do. *Call of Duty* releases a new installment on a yearly basis and continues to release downloadable content during the year up until the release of the next installment a year later. Respondents at Tacit Games say they are slowly closing this gap between games.

Reducing the time spent outside the game environment should increase cultivation, according to Gerbner's theory. The ideal player is exposed to these messages constantly whenever immersed in the video game environment, which should increase

any cultivation effect (Gerbner, 1998). Ideally, the longer the consumer takes part in this system, the more the consumer buys in (literally) to the messages encoded by the producer – the more the producer's reality becomes the consumer's reality. The ideal consumer shares the same reality as the one encoded by the video game producer; it would be determined in the cultural Marxism sense.

To further facilitate the acceptance of producer messages for consumers, developers attempt to make the acceptance easy for the ideal consumer. For example, the inclusion of an in-game store encourages players to consume in a manner friendly to the producer. The senior programmer explains:

> The whole idea behind the in-game store was that before it, you had to exit the title and go into the XBOX arcade store…and a lot of people just don't do that. Whereas, if you offer them an interface within the game itself, you can give them online notifications that hey, new downloadable content is available for this game. They see it right there in front of them and at the push of a button, it comes up right there. They never have to leave the title and it becomes much more accessible.

The senior programmer constructs the decisions in this quote as common-sense and more efficient – an improvement. The ideal consumer in this quote is constructed as someone who does not debate purchasing content. They want to download it and do so. Developers encode the season pass in a similar manner, attempting to persuade the player with a wealth of additional content at a discounted price. The ideal consumer is constructed as investing in the product as a service, rather than the purchasing the core title and downloadable content piecemeal. It is quite possible that by the time the new DLC content is released, the player may have abandoned the game and may never play the new content, but the ideal consumer will constantly be involved, playing the game right up to the release of the next installment.

The ideal consumer is also not satisfied with only parts of an experience. The senior producer explains how the developer attempts to cultivate consumption through creating wants:

> It does sound evil to say this: we are to some degree fabricating a demand, right? We are basically planting this idea in people's minds: you want this, we are making this and you want this, you just don't know it yet.

This is a blatant, but implied message to the consumer. It is never actually spoken in the manner described above. Producers encode downloadable content as something the consumer needs to experience fulfillment in the game. These "false needs" (Marcuse, 1972) are created by the producer and can appeal in a wide variety of ways to consumers. Developers attempt to persuade the consumer that without this downloadable content, he or she is missing out on the full experience or a opportunity to personalize the experience. It is constructed as something as important to the game experience as nourishment, clothing, and lodging is to the everyday human. This is done through marketing, which seeks to bolster the appeal effects of such message encoding by the producer.

The producers of video games commonly use Gerbner's favorite medium, television to market their products to consumers. Associate producer #2 describes one approach to marketing to players, "Internally, we developed videos to show off every single pack and what fun the content was. So, you can hear about a shark gun, but until you see the shark gun and what it does, it doesn't quite connect." Even what is defined as fun is constructed by producers. The ideal consumer is meant to look at such videos and say "I need that."

Respondents for Tacit Games say the developer invests significant amounts of effort to cultivate the ideal consumer. This includes cultivating the consumer's desire to

continue to engage with the product, facilitating this engagement, and making this engagement desirable. The studio design manager says, "It's sort of a core tenet we're trying to do, keeping our player base engaged and thinking about our franchise." Player telemetry and feedback play an important role in shaping and encoding producer messages destined for consumers. In the examination of Tacit Games, respondents describe how content is created based on consumer feedback to appeal to consumers. I examine this next.

Producer perceptions of consumers.

To better cultivate ideal consumers, developers must be engaged with consumer desires. Reflecting the constant shifts in the video game industry and the ideal consumer, Tacit Games collects data from players to better target these desires. This can be done in a variety of manners, including examining public opinion, opening a conversation with customers, and examining game telemetry. Each of these aspects is vital to cultivating the consumer to consume in a specific manner. By examining public opinion, producers are better able to encode their messages for consumers. Opening a conversation with customers allows the customer to feel a sense of ownership in the product. Game telemetry examines what is unsaid in the conversation between producers and consumers, as well as potentially revealing more channels for cultivation.

Measuring public opinion.

Measuring public opinion is an important source for creative direction in the video game development process. All respondents indicated this was a crucial factor in game success. While discussing the creation of downloadable content, the studio design manager stated, "We're catering to the people who like *City Mayhem* so much they are

willing to spend extra money." This quote indicates Tacit Games is primarily interested in consumers who are already invested in the game, and specifically those who will pay for additional content. It would make logical sense to focus additional cultivation efforts on consumers already exhibiting signs of cultivation. Clearly such consumers have responded to the messages encoded by the producer and therefore reflect a reality closest to the ideal consumer as envisioned by the producer. These players have already bought-in to the model of consumption favored by the producer. Additionally, the use of the word "catering" frames the producer as a non-threatening entity that exists to serve the consumer, even though by all accounts investigated so far, the producer controls every interaction and is more concerned with profit rather than customer satisfaction.

To determine what content will be the most profitable, respondents say they examine what consumers send them, forum posts (before and after release), and reviews for public opinion. Approaches to the core game and downloadable content are then modeled after this feedback. Developers examine every angle, looking for the easiest way to cultivate consumer behavior. Associate producer #1 says, "You have to structure your DLC and offer what you think the gamers are going to engage (invest) with. That means you have to be very aware." This quote indicates the developer creates content based on their opinion of consumers and what they think consumers want (or should want). Producers also use public opinion in a way that helps promote consumption. For example, respondents at Tacit Games say such feedback shapes the focus downloadable content. If consumers respond to that content and engage with the downloadable content model, the producer's approach to consumption is legitimized. Similarly, measuring public opinion also allows producers to check the cultivation effects of their message

encoding, although this falls under the third prong of cultivation theory. Respondents say there exists a difference between what consumers think they want, and what they actually want. This tension is the focus of the next section.

The tension of the "mega game."

Ignoring consumer feedback would likely result in failure of the product. However, interviewees also state there exists a give-and-take relationship between what the consumer wants and what the developer provides. This relationship has shifted over the years from a benefit to the consumer, to the benefit of the producer. For example, the studio design manager recalls downloadable content "Was just a way of giving people an extra amount of gameplay… as the years have progressed, it has become more and more of an added revenue…" Part of this shift has to do with the producer's belief that consumers need direction to know what they want. Associate producer #1 believes that while consumers may think they know what they want in a video game, the developer knows best. This tension comes together in his description of the "mega game":

> *If* we were lunatic enough to go online and post 'what do you want to see in *City Mayhem 4*? We would never want to do that, and the reason is that *City Mayhem 4* would come out and not a single one of those things would be in there for the most part. And that's because all gamers in their head a lot of the time, it sounds evil but it's totally true, and I'm the same way actually if you ask me, want everything they love about games *in one game*. Because really all we want is like '*mega game*,' that exists and has everything in it! That's insane. We could never possibly do that and we should never even try, because it would make the worst experience ever, actually. You'd need a controller this big and you'd be pulled in 40 directions at once at every moment of the game.

The senior programmer concurs with the perceived dangers of the mega game, saying "It's like putting all your favorite flavors into a single dish… it would be horrible." While these quotes show the interest Tacit Games has in the opinions of consumers, it also

illustrates the control exercised by the developer in what actually becomes content. The developer decides the direct and control of the design. Tacit Games attempts to frame its product as perfect and what the consumer actually wants. Similarly, associate producer #1 says Tacit Games also looks for ideas internally:

> Sometimes we just have to listen to ourselves, too… We do a lot of internal focus testing, and we will see that people will tell you 'I really like this, but then through the focus testing, the results tell us they didn't actually like it. Or, they will say 'I didn't like this,' but they engaged with it a lot.

This statement describes an interesting relationship between the video game developer and the consumer: The developer wants to satisfy consumer wants, but does not wholly trust the customer to know what he or she wants. The focus by associate produce #1 on internal testing only highlights the preference for the input of those inside Tacit Games over the day-to-day consumer. Similarly, the senior programmer believes "people are not as self-aware as they think they are," placing the opinion of the developer above that of the consumer. These statements illustrate that the video game producer controls not only the means of production and the framework of consumption, but also the content of the game. Additionally, it displays a sense of superiority on the part of the producer. Even though the consumer may help shape some of the content, the majority of control remains firmly in the hands of the video game producer. In the case of video game creation, the customer is not always right. While much feedback from customers is overt and direct (such as game sales), many video game developers, including Tacit Games, harness additional forms of feedback, called "telemetry," to make their products more appealing to consumers.

Harnessing telemetry.

Telemetry is raw data collected from within the game. This may include information that many players do not track, such as time in game or time spent with certain content. The senior programmer for Tacit Games explains:

> We look at where people are going in the world, what they are doing at what times, how long they are doing it for – there's all sorts of information we're secretly gathering, which sounds like a really evil genius kind-of-thing. But there's a certain art to taking raw data and pulling out actual conclusions from it.

The information collected by telemetry is done behind the scenes. Filling the role of plebeians, players likely do not know that their experience is being used to find new ways to create profitable new games or content, but it is this raw data in which respondents place the most faith. The producer attempts to frame this data collection as improving the game experience, but it simply improves the game's marketability by creating more compelling reasons to purchase the game. It is through telemetry that consumers can contribute to the direction of the game without their expressed knowledge.

Data collected through this manner is only interpreted by the developer and decisions are made upon developer assumptions. Respondents in this study have consistently expressed trust in telemetry and developer assumptions over the opinions expressed by the consumer. While data gathering is certainly beneficial for video game producers, it does imbue them with a sort of "big brother" factor, constantly looking for ways in which to modify their business model and content to be more profitable, even at the expense of game enjoyment by the consumer. However, even with advanced technology to gather data on player behavior, video game producers report they still have

problems make sense of the raw information gleaned from consumers' play experiences. The senior programmer explains:

> Sometimes you just get data back and you scratch your head and go, "Well, there's this trend towards this, but I'm not entirely sure. There's so many ways to interpret that." It's like, "Yes we have the raw numbers, but what does it mean? What's it indicative of? Are people not playing this because of this or that?" The numbers don't give you the reason for that. You have to sort of look at the numbers and say, "Well I think that's happening because of this, but I don't know."

Interviewees noted that the developer has become more adept at interpreting the telemetry fed back by players, partially due to the maturation of the *City Mayhem* franchise. Because of changes to *City Mayhem* intellectual property over the years, the franchise has positioned itself as a unique product against a backdrop of other games, such as the popular *Grand Theft Auto* series. Respondents at Tacit Games say the franchise now has a clear vision, which helps them predict what they think consumers what from a game. Associate producer #1 says:

> Over the course of the last eight years, we've sort of seen a lot of feedback from a lot of different sources and I think we've gotten pretty good at interpreting a lot of that data and feeding it back into the franchise. I think in *City Mayhem 1* and *City Mayhem 2,* there was a lot of noise and we still didn't really know how to interpret that, but over time we've sort of figured it out.

As part of the maturation process, producers of the *City Mayhem* franchise clarified the avenues to cultivation. To attract a particular audience, it is vital for a producer to effectively frame their product against other similar games. In the case of Tacit Games, *City Mayhem*'s biggest threat is the popular *Grand Theft Auto* franchise. By situating feedback from consumers within the game's core values, respondents say they are better able to interpret telemetry and encode messages they believe will be effective at cultivating consumption.

From the examination of the industry, the nature of the video game, and the examination of the environment created by video game producers thus far, it should be clear that producers encode their products with messages designed to increase consumption on the part of the consumer. While briefly examined earlier, I will now outline some of these messages in detail. Specifically, I will look at the sites that contain the most visible messages to consumers. These areas include efforts to increase player retention, the social aspects of gaming, and how producers frame their messages to consumers.

Messages cultivating player retention.

Player retention has appeared as major focus for video game producers, but it is not a problem that is easily solved. Player retention involves the keeping the player engaged with the game as long as possible and the strategy of retaining a player from release to release. The senior programmer for *City Mayhem 3* says this is difficult:

> It's really hard to get someone to play the same game longer than six or eight months, regardless of how much DLC we produce. There are a few games… where people will play it for that amount of time, but at some point, another new game is going to come out and they will want to play that. That's just the natural life-cycle of the game.

This "natural life-cycle" is defined by the developer, not the consumer. Moreover, there is nothing natural about it; it amounts to planned obsolescence. The game is designed to only remain relevant for a specific span of time, which is in part, determined by the video game producer. At some point, the developer must release a new product to remain competitive with other games released throughout the year. Although the player may continue to play a particular game long after the game's sequels are released or the developer has stopped supporting it, the developer controls when the game's shelf life

ends. Producers must continue to produce profit, or fail under the logic of capitalism. Again, production of content is continuous because consumption is also continuous. This is especially relevant for the core title and downloadable content model, since the developer can, in theory, continue to add on to the game, extending its life endlessly. Of course, just because the game's developer stops supporting it does not mean the game's life ends for the consumer. People continue to play games like *Super Mario Bros.* to this day, long after the end of the game's effective life span, however the game is no longer supported by the developer.

To survive and thrive in a video game market, a developer like Tacit Games must keep players engaged to remain profitable. It is for this reason the importance of player retention cannot be understated. The senior programmer for *City Mayhem 3* puts it plainly, "Any business can tell you, it's not the core title you really get the money from, it's continuing business that is the most important thing." The most effective way to continue to generate business is to cultivate a consumer who continually purchases in line with the continuous flow of content. As a result, video game creators spend significant amounts of time and money to not only garner a new audience, but maintain and cultivate their current consumers. Developers frame this retention effort as producing an entertaining game, but data from respondents shows a very deliberate effort to keep the player involved and purchasing.

Customization influence on player retention.

Some of the ways in which Tacit Games creates subtle messages to cultivate the ideal consumer is through the focus of customization in the *City Mayhem* franchise. The

studio design manager describes the effort to allow the player to experience the game in a unique way:

> We try to give the player tools to make their character and experience unique to them. By offering more customization items, we allow the player even more options with that. I think that goes over well because it's a wholly understood part of that experience.

Respondents frame customization as an enrichment to the game experience for the player through allowing him or her to play the video game in the manner he or she chooses. However, this is merely the illusion of choice. The producer still controls what choices are available to the consumer, which limits any idea of customization and cultivates a consumer that sees value in digital trinkets. Part of this effort to make customization options appealing is to make such content as close to reality as possible, or just the opposite, allowing the player to experience an alternate persona.

Respondents say customization is one of the most appealing aspects of the *City Mayhem* franchise. As a result, it has found a place as an integral part of the series. By constructing its games to focus heavily on customizability, the developer provides itself with a clear avenue for more revenue. Some examples of customization downloadable content created for *City Mayhem 3* includes a wide variety of in-game vehicles, weapons, and clothing customizations. Between consumer feedback, tracking sales data, and analyzing telemetry, video game producers can develop particularly appealing downloadable content to meet consumer demand. Respondents also report adding customization options are easy, from a technological standpoint. As was noted earlier in this chapter, Tacit Games favors downloadable content because it is easier to produce than a core title, since the groundwork has already been completed. Customization options are no exception to this. Respondents say by structuring the game in a way that

makes such downloadable content easy to create and implement, it has resulted in greater profitability.

Harnessing consumer feedback for targeted downloadable content.

Respondents say inspiration for downloadable content can come from internal discussions and community feedback. Associate producer #2 says directly addressing consumer demands is an easy way for developers to ingratiate themselves with players and to be profitable, "If everyone is like, there's a distinct lack of crowns in this game, then you can go ahead and get one made, because the developers are like, 'Yes, there is a distinct lack of crowns in this game.'" Consumers are intended to feel a sense of gratitude towards the producer for meeting such a demand. Respondents say listening and addressing consumer wants like the kind described by associate producer #2 plays a major role in the development of not only downloadable content, but also future products. However, consumer feedback is only valuable to the producer when it stands to create profit. By harnessing consumer feedback, Tacit Games effectively produces new content targeted to specific consumer demands. By purchasing content they find compelling, players legitimize the core title and downloadable content model. Over time, consumers are cultivated to accept this system as natural and part of the established way of business. They accept more and more of the dominant reading of messages prescribed by producers. Much of the consumer feedback occurs in social networking, which is subsequently observed and utilized by video game producers.

Social networking is a powerful tool for businesses and video game producers like Tacit Games have become increasingly adept at harnessing the new social abilities afforded by the connected world. All of these social channels posses the ability to

cultivate players to consume. Social networking and video games have shifted to reproduce the gaming experience of the 1990s in the digital world. Instead of visiting a friend's house to play a game, people can now have the same interaction online with people thousands of miles away. These interactions occur within a structure designed by the video game industry that is intended to create sales.

Associate producer #1 feels the video game industry has reached a turning point with the integration of social networking, "The increased uptake of social networking is an accepted part of peoples' lives right now and the delivery mechanism of digital is just coming together to make it so downloadable content is hitting at the right time." Five years ago, social networking was still in its infancy. Now it is seamlessly integrated into video games. These frameworks are either controlled or supported by the video game industry. Both Microsoft and Sony allow voice and text communication between players on their respective consoles. Players are able to keep a list of "friends," which tracks what they are playing, so people can play games together, when that function is supported. This creates a new social site for consumers and potentially exposes consumers to additional messages via their friends. Applications outside of the console environment, like *Raptr,* which tracks in-game achievements and logs time spent playing the game, make social play more competitive. By utilizing social networking, video game developers find another way to deliver messages to consumers and new avenues to remain engaged with the consumer for longer periods of time. Associate producer #1 illustrates how things video game developers harness social networking to cultivate consumers to purchase:

> Then the longer the players are engaged with it, the longer their friends see they are playing it. This leads to additional sales and so on and so forth.

> Downloadable content also means an additional marketing pop to drive additional sales to a title. It can extend the lifetime of a product on the shelf. It makes it relevant.

By stretching out downloadable content offerings, video game developers attempt to engage with players for a longer period of time and the social aspects of gaming result in continued exposure to other gamers who may not be playing their product. Messages created by producers indicate to the consumer the importance of social status in the gaming world. Bombarding the player with messages about competing against friends or playing with them tells the player the social aspect of gaming is important. Consumers are told by developers that they need the latest content to play with their friends or be competitive, or that they must spend significant amounts of time in the game to attain a social status. There are several of many types of competition created by the producer in an effort to cultivate the consumer to purchase.

Culture within this framework is clearly influenced by those who control the grounds of the social interaction, the developers. For example, associate producer #1 describes what he calls "asynchronous or social competition." This is competition for fan capital. Fan capital marks status in the gaming community. The more capital accrued, the more competitive the player makes himself or herself. Associate producer #1 describes a hypothetical situation in which fan capital could be negotiated through the framework of an online video game:

> It doesn't mean how good you are in a game. There are short cuts you can show off and still increase your competitive level. Myself and the senior programmer can be playing a game, and suddenly I show up this awesome outfit. I'm not a better gamer than the senior programmer, but maybe I was like, 'Shit I wanna impress him,' so I played the game for ten hours last night and earned this costume. Or I purchased a consumable that allowed me to get it. So I don't have to be as good a gamer as him to still show off and be competitive. Now he's going to see that outfit and be like,

> 'Oh I want that.' So, he's either going to rush off and buy a consumable or play the game for a really long time, which then potentially exposes the game to his friends that aren't playing.

From this example, the cultivation power of social networking is magnified by fan competition. Game that support applications like *Raptr* and *Facebook.com* are more socially visible than those that do not. Associate producer #1 says producers will invest more resources in the future towards social networking, noting "These monetize greatly because people post things to their feed and share it with their friends. They want to one-up their friends constantly." Producers feed this desire by continuously generating content to populate this social competition. These false needs are not an integral part of the game experience, but are framed for importance by the producer. It is this constant interaction, even outside of the console environment that cultivates the player to consume. The need to out-perform and play with friends is constant and ever-changing, thus so too is the need to consume. As discussed earlier in this chapter, associate producer #1 also proposed that if the player feels they have "ownership of the character" through customization options, they will want to show off to other players. This results in players fueling the conditions of their own cultivation.

Setting price and creating value for consumers.

To effectively market products to capitalist consumers, the video game producer and industry must create value. This value is determined in part by the producer and industry. However, there exists a difference between price and value. Video game developers constantly modify their business approaches in a manner to provide more value to consumers – in some cases, artificially creating value.

Value creation in video games is done in a variety of ways, such as offering content that changes how the player experience the game in a way that was not available before. For example, in *City Mayhem 3,* Tacit Games released a downloadable content pack that enabled cheats on the console. This was easily done in the PC version of *City Mayhem 3* and did not require downloadable content or a fee to unlock. Since enabling cheats on console games is not all that common, by controlling access to this aspect of the game, Tacit Games created value.

If a consumer does not find value in a game or downloadable content, they will not pay the price for the content if the perceived gap between price and value is too wide. Applying cultivation theory to video game production would hold that the longer the player is exposed to producer messages proclaiming the value of something, the more likely he or she would be to experience it in that same manner. Price is determined by the producer, but the perception of value is controlled by the consumer. The tension between price and value is a unique site for the negotiation of culture in the video game world. Producers attempt to influence the perception of value to the greatest extent possible. The studio design manager says, "If you do this and play all this, you should feel like you got your money's worth out of it." This quote indicates an attempt to claim the right to determine value and what is fair. However, producers also attempt to develop a balance between price and value that will be the most profitable.

Respondents say the core title needs to be compelling enough to have players purchase downloadable content. The studio design manager clarifies this issue:

> It only works if people care about it. Our goal isn't just to make content we think is going to create new players. We're going after the people who really care about our product and really want those things. That content is more narrowly focused on the hardcore player base.

The studio design manager illustrates how Tacit Games targets the most invested fans of the game. These players care about the game more, and as result perceive more value in the game and its additional content. Realistically, respondents say they are not expecting all of the consumers to purchase the content. They estimated that if 20 percent of the player base purchases downloadable content, the venture would be dubbed a great success. As a result, the developers structure their downloadable content offerings to appease this 20 percent. Producers also strive to create profit by commodifying fannish capital, the kind of downloadable content valued by this 20 percent. By simply making such content available, producers create value for those who care deeply about the game.

Targeting content is an art, according to respondents. Over the years, much of this approach has been trial and error for the *City Mayhem* franchise. Associate producer #1 describes Tacit Games' approach to downloadable content:

> If we tried to offer something that really dived into the story of *City Mayhem*, I don't know if that would be playing to our strengths. So we offer something we know people want, like a ridiculous situation which give you three or more missions that are ludicrous, but fun, and more ways to customize your character.

The quote not only illustrates the use of player feedback to create content, but also shows the faith developers have in themselves to know what consumers want. Additionally it demonstrates the power of fannish capital by placing more value on downloadable content like customization features instead of something that advances the game's story.

Over the course of this section, I have examined many aspects of producer encoding, ranging from the creation of the video game environment to messages destined for the consumer. Additionally, I discussed how such messages are encoded and targeted by Tacit Games to a very specific player base to maximize the time spent engaged with

the game or downloadable content. The longer the player spends with the game and the more immersed he or she becomes, the more likely he or she is to accept the reality of the producer as his or her own.

Cultivating Consumption

As I have discussed so far, developers seek to cultivate their players to purchase their content. This occurs through a wild, nuanced process as evidenced by the analysis conducted thus far. This process is occurs over time, is methodical, and is designed with profit in mind, not consumer enjoyment. As the senior programmer noted earlier, "Any business can tell you, it's not the core title you really get the money from, it's the continuing business that is the most important thing." This quote places downloadable content in a position of major importance to profit generation and it plays a large role in extending the experience outside of the core title. Gerbner (1998) says the messages encoded by those in power function to "preserve and enhance that structure of power" (p. 176). Video game developers, including Tacit Games, do this through redefining the conceptualization of a video game and downloadable content. Additionally, these developers preserve and enhance the structure of power by controlling the video game environment and how the consumer engages with the game, as well as seeking to establish value by creating appealing content. All of the messages encoded by the producer are designed to increase business stability and profits, which is the goal of businesses under capitalism. This section represents the synthesis of how Tacit Games seeks to cultivate consumers to purchase in a specific way.

Defining the "Full Experience"

Framing of the core title and downloadable content experience serves two important functions, it cultivates consumer behavior and also camouflages the logic of capitalism. Capitalism manifests in the producer-controlled forms, such as fan capital, choice, and personalization. Video game producers are careful when framing their work on downloadable content. They attempt to negotiate this experience with the consumer. Developers like Tacit Games specifically decide what is included in the video game, but I now investigate what the "full experience" entails and who makes this distinction.

As noted throughout this chapter, the gap between the core game and downloadable content remains a hot topic of debate among video game players. Video game producers market the core title as the full experience. The studio design manager describes downloadable content as an add-on, "Everything else we add on to it is just a way of exploring or giving you a little bit more." The selection of the word "giving" is particularly telling, since Tacit Games (or any developer) rarely actually "gives" consumers anything. The term "give" implies no compensation in return, which rarely occurs. The studio design manager says "It doesn't mean that we can't or shouldn't give away things for free when it makes sense or if we can," yet this is entirely up to the developer. If the developer can successfully cultivate consumers to purchase products, why hand them out for free? When asked about why downloadable content isn't included with the purchase of the core title, the studio design manager explains:

> I guess what I would say is, do you work for free? I don't mean to be dismissive about it, but it's work. It's work for us to put this extra content into the game. The amount of money you pay for the product is based on the amount of work we put into it. So we feel on the *City Mayhem* game, we put in work we feel people should pay $60 for. If we're making more

> content on top of that, then we should be compensated for that… we're making it a choice for people.

But this is no longer a choice for the cultivated consumer, and that was never the intent of the developer. Every message encoded for the consumer leads to idea that to truly be a fan, to truly experience the game the way it was meant to be played by the developer, means the continued purchase of content until the life cycle of the game is ended by the developer. Without the inclusion of this additional content, the experience is effectively incomplete. In a capitalist society, this is unacceptable. Status is determined by materialism, so the more capital the individual has accumulated, the higher in status he or she is.

Yet, in an effort to defend this strategy, the studio design manager claims, "We're not saying in order to have this full experience, you have to buy this new [downloadable content]." Yet, realistically it is the consumer who makes this determination. Respondents say that they specifically plan out what content will be included on the disc and work halts about two months prior to the final product appearing on the shelves. Associate producer #1 says inclusion of new content with the core title is not possible from a creative standpoint:

> Did you want the disc now or do you want it in six months? We indentify what the core vision of the title is going to be and we try and do that. Whether we develop the downloadable content in parallel or post, or hazy in between the two, we're still trying to deliver is the core vision of the title – the set of missions, this set of assets, etc. etc. etc. The downloadable content isn't included because it comes later or it's expanding. We're allowing the customer purchase in some way their experience. It's not part of the core vision. It could just be experienced as it.

The last sentence is significant, since it pertains to how the player experiences the game. Based on the messages encoded by the developer, the ideal consumer of the video game

would understand the downloadable content as part of the core vision. There is no choice. To further legitimize the viewpoint of the developer, associate producer #1 describes some of the benefits to accepting the core title and downloadable content model:

> People used to get the box and that was it, the game was done. Let's face it, games still shipped with bugs. Now, because the company is still engaged with the title in order to release this downloadable content, they are actually probably providing better support than they used to. Even in the early days of these next gen consoles, and especially for prior consoles, there was no support mechanism. Very few games received patches. If a game was broken, it was broken forever.

If the game is broken, only consumption fixes it. If a game flops, it is no longer supported as it is unprofitable. Still, the developer attempts to construct the experience created by the core title and downloadable content as positive for the consumer, even for those not purchasing the additional content. This represents a shell of the "full experience" prescribed for consumers. If additional content for a game is released, but the consumer does not purchase it, the experience is incomplete. It is subpar. Ideal consumers realize this and upgrade their experience. Developers like Tacit Games make the decision easy by offering the season pass. Associate producer #1 frames this as the best experience possible:

> It's a way to guarantee you can get content as it releases, you're getting it for a discount, and a lot of time people bundle in something special as a thank you. You get something additional or you get content early in some fashion. Also from the consumer's perspective, to them it's a reassurance that this content will come out. It's like a promise. If they are offering a season pass, they are saying, "This content is going to come out."

This "promise" is designed to appeal to the most invested players and convince them to buy in to the franchise. Certainly the message is encoded by producers to say, "We care about your experience with the game and will support it." However, the primary goal of season pass is to generate profit for the producer and increase the player's time spent with

the game. Naturally, the producer never alerts the consumer to this approach, instead framing it a service that makes owning the hottest and latest content a breeze to ensure the player never falls behind on the all-important social capital.

Up to this point, I have illustrated a dizzying number of messages encoded by producers for consumers. Consumers never just "play" a game, they play a game within an environment riddled with messages attempting to cultivate them into the ideal consumer. This experience is negotiated, with consumers accepting some messages and rejecting others. Producers encode their messages with the assumption that the longer the consumer inhabits the game environment, the more likely he or she will view reality in line with the messages created by the producer. Additional credence is lent to this theory by respondents' observations that younger generations of gamers seem to be more accepting of these encoded messages. This next generation of gamers as the digital native represents the developer's ideal consumer – particularly susceptible to messages encoded by developers like Tacit Games.

The next generation as the digital native.

Cultivation theory is heavily rooted in the notion of time. Gerbner was very concerned with the pervasiveness of television and the amount of time viewers spent engaged with the medium. When examining television, Gerbner (1998) noted:

> Children begin viewing several years before they begin reading and well before they can even talk. Television viewing both shapes and is a stable part of lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television's own making.

Today, I argue a similar situation exists with children and video games. Educational video games are commonplace, as are computers. With each generation, children spend

more time with technology. The studio design manager reflects this change, discussing the growing popularity of video game consoles:

> The number of people who have consoles goes up each generation. The number of people playing on a regular basis is going up. Growing up, I had a Nintendo. I had them my entire life. People before me didn't. It wasn't part of their culture. We grew up with them and keep buying them. People your age or younger, are coming in and doing the same thing. It's an increase in the market.

Children have no baseline with which to reference changes to the system of consumption. If they grow up rooted in this environment, it seems natural. Moreover, this new generation understands only the capitalist system. The senior programmer says this generation is "already used to this [downloadable content] business model and they don't really think twice about it… they've already embraced that model, so we're in luck." There is no luck involved. The embracing of the business model is a direct result of messages encoded by the producer and the progression of time. It is the only model this new generation of gamer has known. Producers plant the seed in the minds of this new generation, which grows and produces consumers ready to consume in the manner prescribed (in ideal conditions, if the consumer subscribes to the dominant reading of producer messages). For example, associate producer #1 credits the gamification of mobile devices for this phenomenon. Because these children do not understand consumption in any other way, there is little resistance or agency to the messages encoded by producers. Children grow up learning to consume by these messages encoded for them. It is for this reason that some respondents at Tacit Games and believe critics of the core title and downloadable content model will eventually fade into silence as new, already cultivated gamers become the next core player base. Associate producer #1 suggests the cultivation of consumers takes time:

> I think to be honest, it's one of those things where those people will be pushed into an ever-growing minority. The reason for that is… average age of the gamer, hovers between 26-30, right? You only stay 26-30 until you're 31. That means the people that are used to the game flow on these devices, you know, smart phones, tablet games, which have totally different game flows, that a lot of them are built around this concept of monetization and recurring content drops. Those people are steadily growing into being these core gamers. I think downloadable content had growing pains as it showed up in this generation. But as we move forward into the future, you're not going to see as much of that vocal minority… or that trepidation.

This quote outlines the impact of a generational approach to cultivation theory. Producers sow the seeds of consumer behavior in younger generations. Existing consumers are tended to prepare the fields for harvest. All developer activity is designed to cultivate the ideal consumer.

It is highly likely that the next generation of gamers will also have growing pains with new economic models as they are developed or if the dominant industry model shifts (to free-to-play or pay-to-play, for example), but the producers of video games will attempt to mitigate these pains through encoding messages to cultivate consumers in that new direction.

Through exploiting the generational nature of video games and finding ways to expand gamification, producers have unlocked the ability to alter the way in which players consume. This includes the commodification of fannish capital and downloadable content. With each generation, resistance on the part of the consumer weakens due to the power held in the mass-mediated messages encoded by producers, which permeate every aspect of the gaming environment, as well as outside of it. Some consumers resist the dominant reading of messages prescribed for them, but as respondents note, this population grows smaller and smaller with the passage of time.

Conclusions

Video game developers have managed to create an intricate environment designed to immerse players in messages tailored to cultivate their purchasing behavior in a manner particularly profitable to the developer. It is this environment I map in the model of video game cultivation (fig. 1, p. 176). Specific to my research questions, Tacit Games encodes specific messages for consumers. These messages frame video games as a service, rather than a static existence. They also support the importance of fannish capital, downloadable content, social networking, and claim the system being peddled is more beneficial for the consumer. These messages inhabit every aspect of content created by the producer. The longer the consumer is exposed to such messages, the more likely he or she is to adopt them. As a developer, Tacit Games does have a degree of autonomy in the content it creates. However, it also faces its own unique pressures and limitations. These come in from the economic conditions of the base, the parent publisher, existing video game culture and history, and the agency of consumers. Consumers themselves are also impacted by internal pressures, such as their level of fandom, age, and experience. All parties in this model are still subject to the pressures and limitations of the U.S. base and superstructure.

Attempting to map this process is difficult, given the complex process that forms culture. However, I feel that most of these aspects have been examined in detail throughout this thesis.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Over the course of this thesis, I have examined the encoding process of a cultural phenomenon that impacts the lives of millions the world over. Video games represent a site for the cultivation of the consumer over time and the negotiation of culture between the producer and consumer. This site will continue to change as time passes and technology develops.

Throughout this study, I have attempted to illustrate how video game producers like Tacit Games cultivate their customers to consume in specific ways. In this effort, I specifically examined the video game franchise *City Mayhem*. Producer messages are examined under the lens of cultural Marxism to illustrate their influence on the consumer. This study contributes additional information to the understanding of communication in video games, cultivation theory, producer studies, and cultural Marxism. In doing so, this study effectively answers all of my research questions:

RQ 1: What messages are encoded by Tacit Games to cultivate consumers and what pressures and limitations influence these messages?

RQ 2: In what ways does Tacit Games attempt to cultivate consumer behavior?

RQ 3: How does Tacit Games attempt to frame messages surrounding its products?

Specific to RQ 1, Tacit Games encodes any interaction with consumers (the producer does not need to be aware of this encoding for it to occur). The environment created by the video game is laden with messages, such as the in-game store, the existence of downloadable content, and direct messages to consumers informing them about new content. Additionally, many pressures and limitations exist that influence the

messages created by Tacit Games. As illustrated in fig. 1 (p. 176), some of these include the parent publisher, video game culture and history, as well as the base and superstructure of the capitalist system.

In regard to RQ 2, Tacit Games attempts to cultivate consumer behavior through constant, consistently-focused messages. By continually encoding the same messages for the consumer, Tacit Games legitimizes its approach to business. This was made visible during the examination of the adaptation and expansion of the core title and downloadable content model, as well as the discussion of the digital native. Respondents reported these efforts are duplicated by other members of the industry, which makes such messages even more pervasive.

For RQ 3, Tacit Games consistently frames its messages surrounding its products as positive. Respondents reported that the current course of business pursued by Tacit Games benefitted not only the company, but also the consumer. The decision to frame video games as a service, as opposed to a static piece of entertainment was framed as providing improved customer support and additional content.

Through answering these three research questions, I also made additional observations, which are detailed below.

Video Games

Through my examination of Tacit Games and the *City Mayhem* franchise, I was able to trace the record of changes to the video game industry over time in regards to aspects like game structure and the creation of downloadable content. Through this examination, I illustrated changes to the conception of the video game and what is considered "the full experience." This experience is at the center of the conversation on

cultivation as both parties attempt to control its meaning. In the case of Tacit Games, producers attempt to control what the consumer perceives as a video game and the full experience, as well as what is valuable. The producer attempts to control and cultivate through messages and framing. Respondents discuss how the *City Mayhem* franchise began as a standalone game that added downloadable content as an afterthought. *City Mayhem 2* incorporated more downloadable content, but the focus remained on the core game. For *City Mayhem 3*, producers specifically planned for large amounts of downloadable content and attempted to develop additional content in parallel to the main game. Respondents say this trend will continue for the soon-to-be-released *City Mayhem 4.* This examination of the series over time showed the direction of the franchise at the behest of the developer, as well the gamification of technology and the framing of choice and experience for the consumer. Interviews with respondents revealed producers attempt to keep the consumer engaged for as long as possible (ideally until the next major game release from the company). This includes the erosion of the consumer perception that a video game is what is in the box. Interviews also showed a shift from a self-contained game into a service.

Cultivation Theory

In this study, I interviewed senior employees Tacit Games, looking for the ways in which messages were encoded for consumers and what they were attempting to cultivate. Cultivation theory traditionally examines "recurrent images in network television content… the portrayal of violence, gender roles, race and ethnicity, occupations, and many other topics and aspects of life, over long periods of time" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). In this thesis, I examined these "images" as the

messages Tacit Games produced for consumers throughout the life of the *City Mayhem* franchise. Video game producers encode their messages for consumers with maximum profitability in mind. These messages attempt to legitimize the developer's approach and viewpoints through framing. Examples of this discussed in this study included the producer's presentation of changes to the video game economic system or content as evolutionary or an improvement for the consumer. However, during interviews respondents said profit remains the number one priority. These messages permeate the video game environment in which the consumer is immersed. Cultivation theory holds the longer time spent in the environment, the more likely the consumer "reflects the structure and functions of the institutions that transmit them" (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69). To examine this mass-mediated environment, I applied the first prong of cultivation theory, institutional analysis, which "is designed to investigate the formation of polices directing the massive flow of media messages" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 179). To investigate the formation of such policies, I interviewed five senior staff members at Tacit Games who were charged with the direction of the *City Mayhem* franchise and its many iterations. I questioned why and how producers attempt to cultivate the consumption of the consumer. This included the examination of messages encoded by the producer for the consumer to decode. The reasoning for this study was to examine and explain a largely-ignored phenomenon to create awareness and space for agency on the part of the consumer. This went hand-in-hand with the first prong of cultivation studies is producer studies.

Producer Studies

Following Real's (1996) examination of the *Academy Awards* television show as an exemplar study, I conducted a producer study in an effort to discover the forces acting

upon the producer, as well has what messages are encoded by the producer for the consumer. Real's study investigated how messages are produced and encoded by the film industry for the show. Similarly in my study, I examined how messages are produced and encoded by video game developers for the consumer. This led me to uncover unique power structures within the video game development system and helped provide a map of the political economy of video game creation.

Cultural Marxism

Cultural Marxism involves the examination of the relationship between the production, reception, and interpretation of cultural artifacts through historical contexts (Williams, 1980). As a result, I focused my study on how producers form and encode messages for consumers. This was a logical strategy, given the institutional message analysis prong of cultivation theory. I analyzed data collected from respondents thematically, allowing themes to emerge from the raw data, but using Marxism as a lens to critically examine the data. Results of the thematic analysis indicated three major areas where producers attempt to negotiate culture with consumers. These included the nature of video games, industry structure, and consumer cultivation. Respondents indicated a clear desire on the part of video game producers to increase player retention, loyalty, and spending. They also indicated messages were created with the direct intent to pursue these goals.

Major Conclusions

The major conclusions of this study indicated cultivation theory is applicable to video game studies and cultural Marxism. Following the first prong of cultivation theory, video game producers encode messages with specific messages related to consumer

consumption. These messages are "symbolic events evoking shared cultural significance" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338) and should be examined from both the producer and consumer's view. Organizational forms, power relations, and decision making processes and pressures all fall into the category of institutional process analysis (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Through this case study involving Tacit Games and the *City Mayhem* franchise, many of these aspects of the first prong of cultivation were exposed. I was able to map the political economic structure of the video game producer in particular and record the power relations at play during the development of a video game. While the pressures and limitations that exist between the base and superstructure are numerous and nuanced, there exist two major pressures on the video game developer, pressures from within the company itself and pressures from consumers. Faced with these, video game developers attempt to strike a balance. However, producers also exert their own power upon consumers by constructing the player's environment in a certain manner. For example, by structuring the video game in a specific manner, the video game producer structures the consumer's experience with the game. In fact, the manner in which the consumer consumes is dictated by the video game producer. Specific to consoles and downloadable content, the video game producer in this study has spent significant amounts of time structuring the game in such a manner that downloadable content is offered regularly after the release of the game with the intent to keep the consumer involved with the product. Additionally, the game is constructed to alert the consumer when new downloadable content is available for download. I will now examine the theoretical contributions of this thesis in more detail, as well as outline practical contributions, limitations of the study, and future directions for research.

Theoretical Contributions

Cultural Marxism examines the negotiation of culture between the superstructure and the base. The base and superstructure are connected through the notion of "determination as setting limits and exerting pressures" (Williams,1980, p. 32). I took this view as opposed to the vulgar Marxism description of determinism as the base completely controlling the superstructure. By mapping the production process of a video game, I provided an intriguing look at the limits and pressures exerted between the game's producer and consumer. These limits and pressures include the control of the consumption structure and the way in which messages are framed for consumers. The results of interviews with respondents bring to life the machinations that help shape the culture surrounding video games.

This thesis examines the manner in which Tacit Games operates within the base to attempt to influence the superstructure. Attempt shows intent, a key aspect of cultural Marxism, according to Williams (1980). The "evolution" of game structure and technology discussed by respondents was not coincidental or natural. I revealed producer intent during an examination of how video game producers encode their messages for consumers. The video game developer does attempt to control the conversation as much as possible, but may not succeed in this effort. The relationship between the base and the superstructure in the negotiation of this culture is complex.

With the focus of cultural Marxism on the relationship between the base and the superstructure, I found the approach entirely compatible with Gerbner's cultivation theory.

As cultivation theory seeks to understand institutional process, message systems, and cultivation, it is perfectly positioned to examine the negotiation of culture within the cultural Marxism framework. As Williams (1980) himself argues for the importance of the base over the superstructure, the first prong of cultivation analysis, institutional process analysis, becomes the most relevant. The extension of cultivation theory into cultural Marxism provided a new way to observe operations of the base and the formation of the superstructure within Marxist cultural theory. Additionally, the other prongs of cultivation theory, message system analysis and cultivation analysis, could provide deeper insight into this negotiation of culture and should be pursued in a future study.

Having examined the actual messages encoded by respondents at Tacit Games, I felt it offered a clearer picture as to how the base limits and pressures the superstructure. Some specific examples of this included the way in which the developer controls the manner in which the player consumes. If the player wants to expand his or her experience, he or she has to do so in a manner dictated by the developer. The longer the player is exposed to this environment, the more likely he or she is to accept the conditions as natural. By examining the economic systems industry-wide, it was apparent that the number of messages created for the consumer by producers is significant. The only way to effectively use the first prong of cultivation theory in an effort to uncover how producers attempt to cultivate consumers was to conduct a producer study. By asking direct questions about messages encoded to cultivate consumer behavior, increase player engagement, and strengthen player loyalty, this thesis generated a clear picture of what occurs in the first prong of cultivation theory and directly linked the activity to cultivation theory and the negotiation of culture through a Marxist lens. By speaking

directly with video game producers and examining the actual encoding of messages destined for decoders, I was able to accurately assess intent and how this attempt at cultivation manifests in texts. This approach is significantly superior to attempting to surmise the will of producers by questioning the final decoder of these messages (as would be done in the other prongs of cultivation theory). Qualitative interviews provided a nuanced account of these encodings, revealing far more information than would have been collected through surveys or assessments. Having examined theoretical contributions made by this thesis, I now examine more practical contributions.

Practical Contributions

This thesis has many practical contributions, particularly for video game consumers. These contributions specifically center on media literacy and disrupting the dominant ideology of video game producers. Through examinations like that undertaken by this thesis, consumers are provided an inside look as to how messages are created for them by producers. By exposing such encodings, consumers will be better able to negotiate the culture of the superstructure. This reduces the impact of the base on the superstructure, moving creation of culture further away from the "determinism" of classical Marxism to more of a conversation within the limits and pressures described by Williams (1980). Through the same exposure of encodings, consumers may become more critical of the messages created for them by producers, which in turn, provides a more solid ground for agency. For example, if consumers are aware that they are being cultivated, they may find ways to reduce, recognize, or evade messages encoded for them. As a result, consumers can disrupt the dominant ideology forced on them by the industry and push for more fairness in the sales and design of video games. Similarly, if

consumers become more aware of how feedback is collected for video game development, they may be better able to communicate with developers to see that their desires are met. Ideally, the future of the video game industry will strike a more even balance between the consumer and producer. Unfortunately, this thesis may also have other effects less fortuitous for the consumer. While knowledge of the encoding process may encourage the consumer to reject messages, it may also assist the video game producer to streamline the system. Under capitalism, economic systems intend to function to maximum efficiency. It is possible from the information gathered by this thesis that producers will modify their messages to exercise more dominance upon the negotiation of culture with consumers. For example, if Tacit Games conducted its own cultivation analysis (the third prong of cultivation theory), the developer could discover which messages were the most effective in cultivating consumer behavior. This may result in the development of additional ways to expand the product outside of the box and new avenues for monetization, moving the cultural conversation between producer and consumer back towards the determinism of classical Marxism.

Other contributions afforded by this thesis include a map of the political economy of a particular video game developer, Tacit Games. While this map is not intended to be generalized, it may be applicable in many situations, since many developers like Tacit Games are owned by publishers and are subject to the same pressures and limitations. This map of political economy helped illustrate the internal pressures and limits that impact the messages encoded by the producer for the consumer. For example, in the case of Tacit Games, it was shown the publisher directly influenced the number of downloadable content packs and the release schedule for such content. This may vary

industry-wide, but offered a starting point to begin the examination of the power relations between other developers and publishers. This thesis may also result in future studies, leading to a constructivist view of the industry in general.

As an academic, I intend to build upon this research in the future, further adding to the understanding of the video game industry from a cultural Marxism perspective, as well as in terms of political economy. Additionally, the research conducted in this thesis lends further credibility to the importance of examining the perspective of the encoder – an aspect often ignored in cultural studies and cultivation studies. It is my hope that through this study, intent is shown equally as important as effect. Similarly, this thesis revealed the importance of a case study by gathering nuanced information that would be inaccessible through other means. Having examined several positive results of this thesis, to be ethical, I must also examine its limitations.

Limitations of this Study

The primary limitations of this study remain focused on its inability to generalize to other video game producers and the industry as a whole. As a qualitative case study, this thesis was not so much concerned with explaining a phenomena industry-wide as it is examining the situations and message of a particular video game developer. Again, while many of these experiences will likely be representative of the industry as a whole, it should not be assumed. In the future, the claims of this thesis may be better evidenced by additional case studies at different developers. This could result in a useful benchmark of industry approaches and standard procedures as industry data hits saturation.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively short amount of time spent with the video game developers. While much nuanced data was collected through in-depth

interviews, to fully understand and identify all of the messages encoded by producers would require a significant investment of time. This is particularly important, given cultivation theory's focus on changes over time. To reflect this and the constant evolution of technology heavily emphasized in Chapter 4, a longitudinal study could prove beneficial to map the changes in producers' encoded messages over time. Similarly, recalling the three prong approach of cultivation theory, this study did not address the second and third prongs: message system analysis and cultivation analysis. In effect, this study examined only a third of the big picture. It was neither designed nor able to determine the actual effects of the producer's encoded messages or examine them specifically. This is one of the next logical steps in future directions for study, which I examine next.

Future Directions

The future directions for this field of research are almost limitless. Ideally, I would like to further examine the key research questions addressed in this thesis. This includes a closer examination of what messages are encoded by Tacit Games, the ways in which Tacit Games attempt to cultivate consumer behavior, and how Tacit Games frames the messages around its products.

While I did interrogate what messages are encoded by Tacit Games, it is possible that more messages could be uncovered through a deeper examination of the themes developed through this thesis. These messages could be examined to further identify the ways in which Tacit Games attempts to cultivate consumer behavior. Additionally, it may prove very interesting to scrutinize more messages generated by Tacit Games around its products. This may include examining locations shared by both producers and

consumers, such as Facebook.com, online message boards or question and answer sessions. These sites were not examined during my study. Certainly, deeper investigation of these areas would be beneficial to the emerging academic work on video games. Additionally, such research would serve to deepen and enrich the understanding of the video game industry and the messages it encodes for consumers.

As I mentioned earlier, I addressed cultivation theory's first prong of institutional analysis, but the two others remain: message system and cultivation analysis. These two prongs seem the next logical step for the research on this topic. Message system analysis would be useful to examine the messages industry-wide and divine the similarities. Survey work could be conducted to this end. I feel cultivation analysis would be the more interesting of the two remaining prongs of cultivation, especially if conducted with institutional analysis. Such a study would allow the identification of messages encoded by producers for consumers and contrast the message encoding with associated cultivation effects. This would identify which messages are effective and which are not. Unfortunately, this would also likely provide an avenue for producers to modify and improve their efforts to cultivate consumer behavior. Conversely, it may identify areas in which more media literacy and agency is required. These areas would be based on which messages are the most effective in cultivating player consumption.

Conclusions

As video games continue to erode television's grip on the media diet, the importance of examining video games will rise. Similarly the importance of understanding the relationship between the producer and consumer will also increase. While many video game studies will continue to focus on hot topics, such as violence, it

would be easy to write off the evolution of the video game industry as "natural." However, this could not be further from the truth. Through this thesis, I have made an attempt to expose a series of deliberate messages, changes, and decisions led by producers which directly influence consumers. Additional factors like pressures and limitations were also uncovered. These influences impact the negotiation of culture between the base and superstructure.

Producers attempt to cultivate consumer behavior in a way that is the most profitable, instead of focusing on ways in which to improve the player's experience. I understand the necessity of profit in a capitalist economic system, but question if the focus of game development has shifted too much in this direction. The messages created by producers serve to legitimize their approach while discounting the viewpoint of the consumer. This seems unethical when the benefits for the consumer are negligible. Core games seem too incomplete and continuous consumption seems required of nearly every player. Additionally, this approach to cultivation could potentially be applied to other areas outside of video games, granting great power to corporate interests or politics.

It is vital in the future, that consumers recognize the efforts on the part of the producer to cultivate their consumption. Alternative modes of consumption could be developed for video games that are more consumer-friendly. The video game industry could also grow more supportive of independent video game developers willing to trying new approaches.

Under the model discussed in this thesis, the construction of the environment and institutional messages are akin to producer plowing the field and sowing the seeds of cultivation. The message systems would likely be the actual seed, and the subsequent

juicy plants representative of the cultivation of the realities of consumers. The recognition of this process on the part of the consumer is vital to the preserve a competitive system that serves the interest of consumers. Unfortunately, in the future I forsee a world of video gaming where the entertainment experience is less and less decided by the consumer. Consumers will be further exploited in the name of choice and fandom. Gamers will be told how and what to consume, cultivated never to ask why, and taught to regard every new technology or feature as an "evolution" of technology, designed to better his or her experience. As mentioned in the discussion on gamer "generations" in Chapter 4, this problem is compounded by the fact children do not question that which is presented as the dominant ideology of the time. It is up to the established gaming generation, the old crows, to raise awareness of cultivation practices as a form of praxis. They must pick the field clean before the messages take root.

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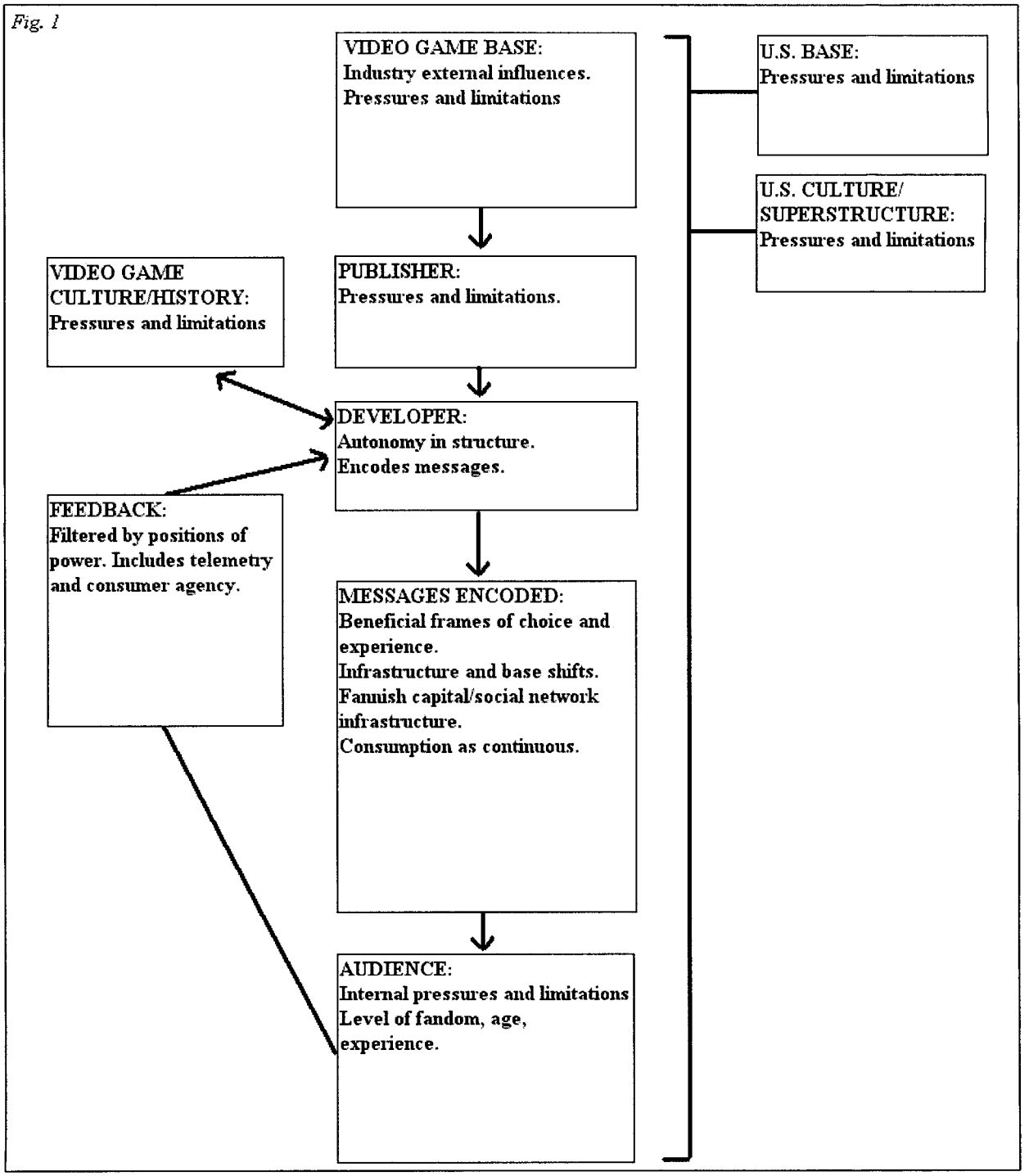
Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Over the last few years, your company has grown significantly in size and profitability. Why do you think that is?
2. As a video game producer, can you walk me through the traditional process of video game creation?
3. What is the business structure of this developer like?
4. What's it like to work here?
5. When it comes to the creation of video games, can you discuss some factors that influence your work?
6. Does the publisher have a say in the development process?
7. Where does the money come from for development costs?
8. What is the most successful game this developer has created? Why do you think that occurred?
9. Can you tell me the typical process for planning DLC?
10. What is it like to work on such a process?
11. When it comes to selling video games, what is the marketing strategy?
12. How successful have your video game offerings been?
13. Does this differ from selling DLC? How so?
14. What exactly is the purpose of DLC?
15. What would you say to a customer who questions why DLC is not included with the original main disc?
16. How successful have your DLC offerings been?
17. Are there any approaches to marketing you find particularly effective?
18. What are your opinions of your customer base?
19. Discuss customer loyalty, how do you make an effort to retain that?
20. What do you feel customers want?

Model of Video Game Cultivation



March 7, 2013

Jonathon Mattson
Communication Studies

Thank you for submitting the research protocol titled, "Video Game Cultivation: Sowing the Seeds of Consumer Behavior" for review by the Eastern Illinois University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has reviewed this research protocol and effective 3/7/2013, has certified this protocol meets the federal regulations exemption criteria for human subjects research. The protocol has been given the IRB number 13-064. You are approved to proceed with your study.

The classification of this protocol as exempt is valid only for the research activities and subjects described in the above named protocol. IRB policy requires that any proposed changes to this protocol must be reported to, and approved by, the IRB before being implemented. You are also required to inform the IRB immediately of any problems encountered that could adversely affect the health or welfare of the subjects in this study. Please contact me, or the Compliance Coordinator at 581-8576, in the event of an emergency. All correspondence should be sent to:

Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
Telephone: 217-581-8576
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Thank you for your cooperation, and the best of success with your research.

Richard Cavanaugh, Chairperson
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